
FALL
into
ME
BECCA NEIL

# Fall Into Me

Becca Neil

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# Content Warning

THIS NOVEL INCLUDES THE following sensitive topics that may trigger reactions in some readers:

- death of a sibling (off page but heavily referenced)
- orphaned baby (due to parent death)
- grief-induced anxiety and depression
- caregiving for a permanently disabled parent
- death of parents (off page and in the past)
- references to and instances of alcohol consumption (not in excess)

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*To Dad,*
*Miss you, love you, bye*

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*Ash (Tuesday, November 16, 2021 – 2:14 p.m.):* Hey, sis! Sorry I missed your call! I think I just aced my educational equity and diversity exam. Call me later when you get the chance, when Bri is sleeping or something. I'll be up late working on that project for my child development and learning class. Love you! <3

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# Chapter One

## Ash

"ASH, SERIOUSLY, YOU HAVE to come visit. The campus is incredible! You could still transfer, you know. Finish up your last two years at UCLA with me and then find a good master's program down here. Get away from all that dreariness. No more clouds and rain and cold all the time. I mean, really, it's sunny and seventy-five today. In *November*! Plus, I know Bri is just dying to see her favorite uncle again! Anyway, I should go. Call me! Miss you, love you, bye!"

The message played for the umpteenth time, the only sound in the quiet vehicle other than Ash's occasional sniffles. He reached over to where his cell phone sat on the passenger seat, hit a button on the screen, and dropped the phone, barely taking his eyes off the road. The message started over. Again.

"Ash, seriously, you have to come visit . . ."

He took one hand off the steering wheel just long enough to wipe the fresh tears from his cheeks. It had been exactly twenty-three hours, thirty-seven minutes since he'd missed her call. And seventeen hours, eight minutes since he'd gotten the *other* call.

He hadn't slept. He couldn't. And he wasn't sure when he'd be able to. He'd just hit the Grapevine and still had about an hour and a half to Los Angeles. And then—

". . . Anyway, I should go. Call me! Miss you, love you, bye!"

His hands gripped the steering wheel tighter, and he tried—really, he tried—to stop the sob building up in his chest. But he couldn't; it came anyway. And with it, his heart seemed to rip in two. He gasped for air, unable to

breathe, and more pain than he thought he'd ever felt in his life tore through him.

She was gone.

Forever gone.

Not coming back gone.

He'd never hear her voice again, except for on this damn voicemail. And he'd never get to see her beautiful face, smiling. Always smiling. He'd never hug her, never be hugged by her. He'd never get to hear her tease him, never see her eyes light up, never hear her laughter.

*"Love ya, big brother!"*

*"Why do you insist on calling me that? We were born literally twelve minutes apart."*

*"Because you're . . ."*

*"What?"*

His stomach knotted up, and pain erupted in his chest again. More this time, though. Worse.

Still gasping, he put his blinker on and took the next pull-off along the shoulder. Then he slammed to a stop, shifted into park, and lowered his head to rest against the top of the steering wheel. His breaths were coming much too fast and yet were too shallow, and he couldn't stop himself from shaking. He screwed his eyes shut tight.

*"Because you're . . ."*

*"What?"*

*"It'll sound silly."*

*"Tell me anyway."*

*". . . you're my protector. Always there, keeping me safe."*

Dammit.

There wasn't anything he could have done. He knew that. But her voice replayed in his head, and he could see her comfortable smile, her bright blue eyes sparkling as she looked up at him. He could hear her light laugh, muffled as she dropped her chin to hide her hint of embarrassment. He could feel her warmth as he'd pulled her into a tight hug.

Some protector he was. Some big brother. He'd failed her. He'd failed both of them.

Ash blinked back the blurriness clouding his vision, though his eyes remained sore and swollen from crying, and he took both hands off the steering wheel to wipe his cheeks again. He didn't have time for this right

now. Shaina was waiting for him at the hospital. And Bri would be counting on him.

He swallowed hard, blinked again, and glanced over at his phone. It was just past noon. He needed to get there soon. No more stops, no more stalling. For Bri.

His hand felt oddly heavy and detached as he reached over and picked up his phone. Numbly, he navigated to Shaina's last text and reread the message. She was at UCLA Mattel Children's Hospital in the pediatric ICU with her parents and Bri, and he needed to get there soon. As soon as he could. So he could be there when the doctors cleared Bri to be discharged.

Because she'd be counting on him.

His stomach clenched again, the knot growing tighter. He could barely feel his fingers, but he managed to type out a couple of quick messages to update Shaina on his ETA.

*Ash (12:06 p.m.):* Just hit the Grapevine. I'll be there before 2

*Ash (12:06 p.m.):* Bri is still okay?

He didn't have to wait long for a response. Shaina's messages popped up almost immediately.

*Shaina (12:06 p.m.):* You made good time. She's doing well, just went down for a nap. The nurses here are great and love her

*Shaina (12:07 p.m.):* Drive safe. We'll be here with her the whole time. Remember, Californians drive at least fifteen mph over the speed limit

*Shaina (12:07 p.m.):* Although I told you to be safe, didn't I? So, drive safe but fast? lol See you soon

It was impossible to hold his tears in or stifle the weak laugh that escaped him, though it came out more like a strangled breath. He'd already been pushing ten to fifteen miles per hour over the speed limit the whole way down from Seattle, going with the flow of traffic. And he wasn't sure it could be considered safe for him to be driving *at all* right now, even if he'd been going the speed limit. Grief didn't exactly put him in the right frame of mind for careful driving. Nor did the lack of sleep.

God, he was exhausted. But that didn’t matter right now. Getting to Los Angeles mattered. Getting there for Bri, his three-month-old niece who’d just lost her mother, that was what mattered.

Another sound escaped him, but this time it was one of those painful, emotional sobs that was impossible to stop. His chest constricted as he closed his eyes against the tears, and he willed himself to be strong. For Bri. No matter how much he was hurting right now, she had to be his priority.

He forced his eyes open and stared down at the phone for a few more seconds. Then he typed out a short text to Shaina to let her know he’d be careful, made sure the navigation was set to UCLA Children’s Hospital, and pulled back out onto the freeway, heading south toward Los Angeles.



“SHE’S . . .”

“She’s happy to see you.” Shaina set her hand gently on Ash’s shoulder, though he barely felt it as he stared down at the smiling baby cradled in his arms.

His throat was dry, and he couldn’t seem to form any words. She was gorgeous. Beautiful big eyes and chubby pink cheeks and a head of thick dark hair. And she cooed and giggled and seemed to try reaching up toward him before balling her hand into a fist and stuffing it right in her mouth.

“That’s . . . that’s new, isn’t it?” he choked out, ignoring the tears that slid down his cheeks. “Stuffing her hand in her mouth like that? And when did she get so big? And how does she look—how does she look so much like—”

He snapped his mouth shut to keep a sob from escaping and closed his eyes for a moment as he held his niece a little bit tighter. Next to him, Shaina wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

“She started doing that the day before yesterday,” Shaina said quietly, and Ash could only nod.

He managed to open his eyes again, and Bri was staring up at him now, her gray-blue eyes so curious and innocent. He tilted his head down and brought her up slightly to kiss her forehead as a shudder coursed through him.

He’d made it. Barely. The doctor had just finished clearing Bri for discharge when he’d arrived, and the social worker wasn’t expected for another thirty minutes or so. And Shaina had already gotten him up to speed on all the tests they’d done—everything showing that Bri was perfectly

healthy and happy, despite having spent a number of hours alone in her crib before Shaina had gotten home from class and found Ashlynn lying on the floor not five feet away.

She'd died quickly, they'd said. Quickly and most likely painlessly. Her heart had just stopped. Sudden cardiac arrest was very uncommon in young adults, and there had been no signs or symptoms, no indication that Ashlynn had even had a heart problem. Hell, they didn't even have a family history of heart problems or anything that might have suggested such. And the initial autopsy results had shown she'd had no drugs in her system—which Ash could have told them and he was sure Shaina *had* told them.

His sister, for all anyone knew, had been the picture of health.

Which only made this so much more difficult and devastating.

Bri closed her eyes and let out what sounded like a contented sigh as she continued sucking on her fist, and Ash watched her suckling gradually slow until her hand slipped out of her mouth. He swallowed hard and looked up at Shaina's parents, Joanna and Henry Waller, who sat on a small sofa on the other side of the hospital room. They both looked not much better than Shaina—tired and sad and a little pale.

Ash shook his head and blinked back yet more tears. "I-I don't know the first thing about taking care of a baby," he admitted. He tried not to let his voice crack, but he knew he couldn't hide all of his emotions from them—his pain and uncertainty and fear were clearly etched on his face, he was sure.

Joanna smiled softly at him, although he could see the strain in her brown eyes, and she stood, letting go of her husband's hand. Her petite frame looked fragile, but when she walked over to him and reached up to touch his cheek, he felt all her warmth and certainty.

"It's scary, I know," Joanna said gently. She lowered her eyes to the baby in his arms, and her smile softened even more. "Even when you're prepared for parenthood, it's still scary. But the most important thing is love, sweetie. And you've got plenty of that. You'll figure everything else out."

From the other side of the room, Henry stood, and Ash lifted his eyes to meet the older man's. For the last several years, Henry had been almost like a father figure to him, and now, as he blinked back more tears and watched Henry cross the room toward them, Ash couldn't help but feel lucky to be surrounded by people he knew loved him. And Bri.

The Wallers were as close to family as he had. He and Ashlynn had grown up living next door to them in Renton, just outside of Seattle, and Shaina had been his and his sister's best friend for as long as he could remember. Then,

when their parents had died in a car accident when he and Ashlynn were both seventeen, just over three years ago, the Wallers had taken them in. They still helped and supported him, financially and otherwise, even after they'd moved here to Los Angeles and Ash had stayed up in Seattle to attend the University of Washington.

It meant so much to him that they were here now. All of them together again.

All of them except Ashlynn.

The pain rushed through him, sharp and jagged, and he trembled as he leaned heavily against Shaina, who wrapped her other arm around him to hold him.

Through bleary vision, he saw Henry stop behind his wife and set his hand on her shoulder. "I can't imagine how difficult this is for you, Ash. But I also can't imagine anyone more capable of caring for this baby than you," he said, and his voice was so full of conviction, so sure, so solid and confident that Ash had to close his eyes against the overwhelming rush of whatever painful mixture of emotions hit him.

His tears came as he forced out a nod, and he let himself cry this time. He wanted to apologize, tell them he would get his act together, reassure them all that he would be strong—for Bri. But Shaina just rubbed his back and soothed him with quiet murmurs, and then he felt Joanna and Henry both step closer and pull him into their embrace as well.

Bri continued to sleep soundly, oblivious to her uncle's grief. It was better that way, Ash knew. Better that she was so young. Better that she wouldn't know this pain he was feeling. Better that she wouldn't remember any of this. She shifted slightly in his arms and let out a quiet gurgle as he straightened up, sniffling. She looked so peaceful and relaxed.

He was glad for that.

A quiet knock came from behind them, and Ash turned toward the sound, his arms automatically tightening around Bri. An older woman dressed in light-pink scrubs entered the room holding a white folder.

"Hi there, you must be Uncle Ash," she said, her smile soft and kind.

Ash could barely nod, and he clenched his jaw and looked down at the sleeping baby again.

"This is nurse Inés," Shaina told him, squeezing his shoulder gently. "She's been helping take care of Bri since this morning."

He managed another nod but didn't look up. He was suddenly more tired than he cared to admit. "I-I should sit."

Shaina's hand drifted down to his elbow, and Ash let her lead him over to the couch along the wall, where her parents had been sitting just moments before. He sank slowly down into the cushions, still holding Bri close to him, and then he reached up with his free hand to wipe his eyes.

Damn tears. How was he *still* crying? How could he still have tears after all he'd cried in the last twenty hours or so?

Inés pulled a chair over to sit closer to him, and when he lifted his eyes, he was met with her kind, understanding gaze. She gave him a sad smile. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she said, and he pursed his lips as he tried to not cry more. Again. The damn tears that just wouldn't stop.

"Th-thank you," he mumbled, and he lowered his gaze to watch Bri sleep as Inés started to speak.

"I'm glad little Bri has you," she said. "And I know this all seems difficult and impossible, but I want to make sure you know there are resources available to help you."

There was a pause, and maybe Ash thought she was waiting for him to say something, but he couldn't. He had no words. And his chest hurt. He closed his eyes and nodded.

"I've got all of Bri's discharge paperwork here," Inés continued, her voice low. She moved her chair a little closer to him, opened up the folder, and started going through everything.

A summary of all the tests they'd run.

Another summary of the treatment they'd given her since she'd been mildly dehydrated when she'd arrived at the hospital.

A referral for a follow-up visit in one week.

An informational handout about dehydration and proper nutrition in infants.

Another handout listing resources for support and grief counseling.

Ash listened, but he wasn't sure how much of the information he'd remember. His brain already hurt. And he was so tired and so completely overwhelmed and so, so broken.

When Inés finished, she closed the folder and handed it to Shaina, who still sat next to Ash. "Lewis—he's the social worker assigned to Bri's case—he should be here any minute, and he'll need to talk to you before you leave. There will be some paperwork you'll have to get completed to begin the process to file for legal guardianship, but since you're her family, it shouldn't be an issue."

Her *only* family. The nurse had left out that word. Ash was the *only family* Bri had.

God, he missed his sister already.

*"Miss you, love you, bye!"*

The familiar words—Ashlynn's signature farewell phrase—echoed in his mind, and they were so real for a moment that it was almost as though she were right there next to him, her eyes smiling up at him as she pushed a lock of her dark hair back behind her ear.

*"Love ya, big brother!"*

Ash bit his lower lip to stop himself from sobbing again. Then he nodded some sort of response to Inés's explanation and heard quiet voices as Inés and Shaina continued talking about something else. Joanna jumped in with a question, and Ash thought he even heard Henry's voice too. But the words were garbled and sounded far away. And he couldn't really understand what they were saying. All he could do was stare down at his niece and think about how beautiful and perfect she was.

And about how she was going to grow up not ever having really known her mom.

Ash lifted Bri up again so he could kiss her forehead, and he closed his eyes as the voices around him quieted. Shaina's arm draped over his shoulders.

"You're going to figure it all out, Ash. You'll be a wonderful uncle to her," Shaina said quietly, squeezing his arm.

His breath shuddered, and when he opened his eyes again, Bri was wide awake, gazing curiously back up at him. She grinned a big toothless grin, gurgled a few nonsense sounds, and then brought both of her hands to her mouth and stuffed several fingers in. He couldn't help but laugh lightly, though a tear slipped down his cheek at the same time.

He would. He would have to figure it all out. And he would do everything in his power to give her the best life he could.

He looked sideways at Shaina, and neither of them said anything. But when Shaina smiled sadly at him and nodded, he knew she understood.

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*Dad (Monday, November 29, 2021 – 7:01 a.m.):* Your mom's OT appointment is at 3:15 today with Dr. Van Wicklen. Then she's got that follow-up with Dr. Patel at 4:45. You'll be able to get her there? I'll meet you as soon as I can, sorry I can't get off work early. Thx

*Dad (7:12 a.m.):* Oh yeah don't forget they adjusted her warfarin dose. I just picked up the new rx last night. The pills are blue (4mg). Thx

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# Chapter Two

## Cass

CASS MUTTERED A STRING of curses under his breath as he pushed back his desk chair and stood. He had *one* task he had to complete today. Just one. Then he'd have the rest of his Tuesday free to get caught up with all the chores and cleaning he'd been putting off since Thanksgiving last week. And if the nice weather held, he could take his mom down to the park to get her out of the house.

But even just this *one* thing he had to do was giving him trouble. Because the damn router needed to be replaced.

He took a deep breath to steady himself, knowing his mom didn't need to see or feel any of his anxious energy, and he headed out into the living room to reset the router—again.

The TV was playing quietly—some episode of an old crime mystery series his mom had probably watched a dozen times already—and Cass paused at the end of the hallway as his gaze shifted to the frail figure sitting on the couch.

She turned her head slowly toward him, a weary, slightly crooked smile growing on her lips. With her good hand, she patted the couch cushion next to her. "Come sit, dear. You look tired."

He allowed himself a weak laugh at that as he shook his head. "I am tired, ma, but I don't have time to sit. The application deadline is next week, and I have to get these documents submitted today for my letters of recommendation," he explained.

Her eyes showed her confusion, although it only took her a moment before she nodded in understanding. “Right. Your grad school application. I forget things,” she said slowly, and she tilted her head to one side as she gave him another smile. “My brilliant boy. I wish . . . I wish you . . .”

She trailed off, but he could tell it wasn’t because she couldn’t find her words. It was because she still felt guilty. His heart twisted a little, and he shook his head again and crossed the room toward her.

“No, ma. Don’t feel like that. I’m happy to be here. You know that, right?”

“I know. But you had plans for your future and places to go and things to do,” she said, her eyes not leaving his. He was surprised at the conviction he saw in her, although it was tinged with sadness and regret. “I wish you hadn’t had to put your life on hold for me.”

He shook his head yet again, willing her to understand, and he took the last few steps across the room to the couch. He really didn’t have time, but he sat next to her anyway, and he gently wrapped his arm around her thin shoulders and pulled her up against him.

“I’m not putting my life on hold, ma. That’s why this online MLIS program is going to be perfect for me. I can stay here with you and Dad and still get my degree.” He knew that wasn’t exactly what she’d meant, or at least not *all* of what she’d meant, but he was intent on sounding as optimistic as possible. Even if his own optimism was hanging on by a thread most days.

At the same time, he allowed himself to feel some measure of relief as he recognized the relative clarity of her words and the ease with which she’d spoken them just now. It had been nearly nine months since her stroke, and most of her doctors had cautioned them that at this point, she’d probably regained about as much motor control and physical function as could be expected. Much of her left side remained weak, a condition Cass had learned was called hemiparesis, and despite an extensive rehabilitation regimen involving multiple physical and occupational therapy sessions every week, it was unlikely she’d ever regain full function of her left limbs. Her speech and communication, however, seemed to be improving daily now. Although she still spoke slowly, she no longer had trouble choosing the right words or putting words together in the right order to form cohesive sentences.

And given how difficult things had been just after her stroke, her ability to communicate now was a huge improvement.

She set her hand on his thigh, patting him gently. “It’s not just school, and you know it. What about other things? That boyfriend of yours? Mitchell? Michael? Gosh, I can’t remember names anymore.”

Cass coughed weakly and shook his head. “His name was Miles, ma. And we only went out once. Months ago. He moved back to Portland, and we haven’t spoken since. We, uh, didn’t really click.”

“Oh, darn, that’s too bad. He was handsome,” she said with a quiet laugh, and Cass closed his eyes as he felt his cheeks heat up.

That was true at least—Miles had been handsome. But he’d also been much more interested in himself than in Cass, and during the entire two hours of their one and only date, which had seemed to Cass to be the longest two hours in the history of time, Cass had barely managed to get in a few words edgewise. He’d been happy to end the night with a mutual “I don’t think this is going to work,” and he and Miles had gone their separate ways. That had been in early May, just before Cass had graduated from UC Davis with his BA in art history and made his final commute back home to Redding to help take care of his mom full time. He hadn’t dated—or wanted to date—since.

“I’m just teasing, you know.” His mom patted his leg again, and when he nodded briefly, she sighed. “I just want you to be happy. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. And I know . . . I know how hard this has been. You and your father have been so . . .”

She didn’t finish her sentence, and Cass shifted slightly so he could see her face. She was looking straight ahead, toward the TV, but her eyes were glistening, wet with unshed tears.

He hated seeing her upset, but he knew there wasn’t a whole lot he could do to reassure her. He’d try anyway. He squeezed her shoulder gently and leaned over to press a light kiss to her temple. “I’m plenty happy, ma. And I love you very much.”

She closed her eyes, and if not for the hint of tension he could make out in her jaw, he might have thought she’d fallen asleep. But then the right side of her mouth twitched up in a small smile.

“You’re my sunshine, Caspian. I love you too.”

He swallowed hard and let the words buoy him as they always did. And he allowed himself to linger there, sitting with his mother, for another few

minutes. Then, when she seemed settled and content again, he excused himself to go reset the router so he could finish his grad school application.



CASS FINISHED PUTTING AWAY the last of the dishes just as he heard the front door open and his dad's heavy footsteps enter. He glanced at the clock on the microwave and frowned.

"Ten thirty tonight, Dad? They're not giving you a break this week, are they?" he said, turning around as his dad shuffled to a stop in the doorway to the kitchen.

His dad's eyes were tired, and the older man nodded but didn't otherwise respond. Cass forced a tight smile and motioned to the kitchen table.

"Here, sit. I made stuffed pepper soup. I'll heat some up for you. Mom's asleep already, but she said to tell you good night and she loves you. And . . ." Cass let his ramble trail off. His dad still stood in the doorway, staring at the ground. His hands were stuffed deep in his pockets, and his shoulders were hunched. "Dad?"

The silence that filled the room felt more than uncomfortable, and Cass wasn't entirely sure why. Finally, his father looked up, his deep-brown eyes troubled.

"Sorry, Caspian, that sounds good. Damn good, actually. I appreciate it," he said, offering Cass a small smile. He ran a hand through his graying hair and blew out a long breath. "Sorry, it was a long day, and I knew you were here with your mom, but I don't like being gone all day like that and not being home on time for dinner and to help get her into bed and everything."

Cass gave his dad a small nod and motioned again to the table. "She had a good day today," he started as his dad moved to take a seat. Cass turned to the fridge and took out a large Tupperware filled with the soup he'd cooked earlier in the day. "It was warm enough that I was able to take her to Turtle Bay, and she really enjoyed that."

He kept talking as he portioned out and heated a bowl of soup for his dad, explaining all about his mom's day. He focused on the good—especially how her speech was so much clearer and how she seemed to be

more articulate today. But he also had to mention how tired she'd been and how much she'd struggled with some of her physical therapy exercises they'd worked on together later in the day. He couldn't hide stuff like that since they all needed to be on the same page with regard to her care and recovery, even though sometimes he wished he could.

He hated seeing the worry in his dad's eyes as much as he hated seeing his mom upset. But he knew being worried was sort of part of his dad's job description.

"She wants to make you breakfast tomorrow morning," Cass said after he'd finished all of his updates and answered all of his dad's questions about the day. His dad raised his eyebrows with a skeptical look, and Cass shrugged. "She said pancakes and eggs should be easy enough? Although, I think she'll need help with—"

"—the mixing, at least."

"Yeah," Cass agreed, and he stood and picked up his dad's now-empty soup bowl to move it to the sink. "So I'll get everything out for her before I leave. I have that meeting with Mr. Peterson at the library so he can write one of my letters of recommendation. That's not going to be a problem, right?"

He half expected his dad to question it or ask him to reschedule or something, and that wasn't because his dad didn't support his decision to apply to grad school but because he knew how much his dad was always so overwhelmed with everything—juggling all the long hours he put in at the power plant where he worked and still trying to make it to all of his mom's doctor's visits and therapy sessions. It was a lot.

So Cass was surprised when he glanced over his shoulder to see his dad shaking his head.

"No, of course not. Not a problem at all." There was a glint of pride, maybe, in his dad's eyes, and it wasn't something Cass saw very often.

He pursed his lips and nodded slowly. "Thanks, Dad."

His dad looked ready to say something else, his expression thoughtful if not a little troubled, but instead, he just gave Cass a small nod. "I'm gonna turn in. You'll be back before ten tomorrow morning?"

"Yeah, definitely."

"'Kay. Thanks for dinner."

Cass felt a strange tightness in his chest as he watched his dad stand stiffly and push his chair in. And when his dad looked up at him a moment

later, that thoughtful, troubled expression had morphed into something just a little softer. Cass gave his dad a tight smile. “Tomorrow is chicken potpie. Your favorite,” he said, trying to inject some cheerfulness into his voice.

His dad’s tired laugh caught Cass off guard, and he found himself smiling again.

“Ah, you really are the best, kiddo. I’m not sure what I’d have done these last few months without you,” his dad said, and then he opened up one arm and motioned to Cass. “C’mere. Your old man needs a hug.”

Something tugged at Cass’s heart, and it wasn’t that they didn’t ever hug or that his dad didn’t ever really thank him or praise him. But something just felt good in that moment, and he found himself nodding and blinking back tears as he crossed the small kitchen. His dad was a hulk of a man—six foot three to Cass’s respectable six feet, with broad shoulders and a solid build—and Cass felt swallowed up in his hug when the older man’s strong arms pulled Cass against his chest.

His dad didn’t say anything more, but the silence was much more comfortable now, and Cass let himself relax into his father’s hug, not in any hurry to move. It was several long moments before his dad straightened up, gave Cass another tired smile, and then tipped his head toward the entrance to the kitchen.

“I should go check on your mom and get to bed,” he said, and after Cass nodded briefly, his dad turned and disappeared out of the kitchen and down the hallway.

Cass closed his eyes and let all the feelings settle in his chest. Mostly, there was some strong swell of contentment, maybe. Contentment and hope. Both things he hadn’t felt in a long time. Not that he expected everything to be magically better tomorrow—to see his mom feeling well and his dad rested and relaxed. But his dad’s support had maybe been exactly what he’d needed.

He blinked his eyes open and pulled his phone out of his pocket. 11:03 p.m. An early night for him, if he could manage to get right to sleep. He let out a sharp breath, stuffed his phone back in his pocket, and turned to the sink to finish loading the dishwasher. Then, he shut off all the lights and headed down the hallway to his bedroom.

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*Shaina (Wednesday, December 8, 2021 – 2:13 p.m.):* Mom just bought my plane ticket. Flight gets in Saturday morning at 9:30, and I'll catch a Lyft from the airport to your place, so don't even worry

*Shaina (2:16 p.m.):* And don't get all crazy and feel like you have to unload EVERYTHING from the trailer by yourself! WAIT FOR ME!

*Shaina (3:36 p.m.):* That storm looks kinda bad, but they're saying it's supposed to dump the most snow in NorCal Thursday night? So you should be well into Oregon by then? Promise me you'll be careful. And give Bri a kiss for me. You're going to be fine. Love you and see you on Saturday

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# Chapter Three

## *Ash*

“SHH, SHH, BABY GIRL, I got you. I-I got you.” Ash rocked the fussy baby gently, holding her close to his chest. She made a few more weak sounds but didn’t start crying again, and Ash almost cried with relief himself when her eyes finally, finally drifted closed and she quieted for the first time in over an hour.

He tore his eyes away from her just long enough to glance out the window of his hotel room, and his stomach sank. A thick blanket of white coated the parking lot, and large, fluffy flakes fell from the dark sky, showing no signs of stopping.

Shaina had been wrong. In fact, every single forecast he’d listened to in the last three days leading up to his departure had been wrong. The storm hadn’t waited for Thursday night. It had hit early Wednesday afternoon. Early and hard.

Ash took a deep breath to try to calm himself as he turned away from the window. His eyes immediately fell on the small flatscreen TV on the dresser across from the single king bed. The news played quietly, and he resumed his slow pacing back and forth in the room, rocking Bri gently, while he watched the disaster playing out on the news.

Interstate 5 was shut down from his location at the south end of Redding all the way up through Yreka. Several multivehicle pileups, including one involving a semitruck that had jackknifed and slid right off the roadway, were still in the process of being cleared, and Caltrans had shut down traffic

in both directions. No one was being allowed through, even with winter tires or chains—neither of which Ash had anyway.

When they started speculating about how long the closure might be, Ash felt his heart start to beat faster again. He closed his eyes and walked back toward the window. He didn't want to hear it. They'd probably be wrong anyway. Things would be fine in the morning. They'd get those big plows to clear the highway—it was I-5, after all; they had to keep it clear, right?—and it would be reopened by the time he woke up in the morning.

Then, he and Bri could be on the next leg of their trip, make it through the Siskiyous, and reach Portland by late afternoon. He'd be home Friday, Shaina would fly in Saturday to help him get Bri settled and unpack all of Ashlynn's and Bri's things, and he'd somehow find the time to cram for his final exams, which were Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday next week. It would be fine.

"Snowfall is expected to continue throughout the night, and accumulation of another ten to twelve inches is possible. This is truly a treacherous storm and—"

Ash's stomach churned again as he spun around—maybe a bit too quickly—grabbed the remote control from the bed, and hit the mute button, cutting off the voice of the news anchor. His eyes darted down to the baby in his arms. Bri gurgled quietly but didn't stir, and Ash sucked in a sharp breath and watched her sleep for several long seconds before he moved back over toward the armchair in the corner of the room and sat.

Cradling Bri carefully in one arm, he leaned forward slightly to pull his cell phone out of his pocket. The screen immediately lit up with notifications—too many to even count. Texts and missed calls from Shaina and Henry and his friend Grant, emails from his professors, social media notifications asking him to check in and mark himself as safe, National Weather Service warnings for the winter storm.

A sudden feeling of lightheadedness overwhelmed him, and he set his phone down on the nightstand next to him and then closed his eyes and took slow, deep breaths.

He should call Shaina back. If nothing else. It was nearly midnight now, but she'd still be up. She had her last final exam in the morning—biochemistry, maybe—and she'd be studying hard. And worried about him and Bri.

With a long sigh that he kept as quiet as possible, Ash pushed himself back to his feet, holding Bri against his chest. He stared down at her for a second, and a now-familiar ache and sadness filled him. She was beautiful. And this was so incredibly hard. Before he could stop it, the ache and sadness seemed to balloon into much more intense emotions—guilt and grief and doubt. He wasn't ready for this—his first night alone with Bri. He was still just a stupid kid. Just twenty years old—not old enough to drink, but apparently old enough to be his niece's legal guardian. Pain shot through him again, and he almost had to sit back down.

Almost.

He held himself still for another moment, closed his eyes, and let out a shuddering breath. He didn't have room to have these emotions right now. Not doubt. Not that deep, deep despair that he could feel hiding out inside him, pushing against him with a dark loneliness he'd never really known before. No, he didn't have room for that right now, right here, when he needed to be *present*.

He pushed all his pain and grief down and moved the few feet to the bed, where he'd set up the small travel bassinet Joanna had bought for him the day before. Then he bit his lip as he very, very slowly lowered the sleeping baby down into the bassinet.

*"She likes when you hum to her. But really softly. And if she starts to get fussy, sometimes—not all the time, but sometimes—if you put your hand right here, on her chest, it'll calm her."* Shaina's words from his very first night in California nearly three weeks ago echoed in his mind, and Ash began humming quietly, the lyrics to "You Are My Sunshine" swirling around in his head.

No crying. He would not cry. He couldn't cry more.

Telling himself that didn't stop the tears from coming, though, as the meaning of the lyrics—simple as they were—brought the grief right back again.

Thankfully, Bri settled into the bassinet and didn't move, her eyes still closed lightly and her chubby pink cheeks occasionally plumping as she half-suckled in her sleep.

He watched her for a couple of minutes, trying to pull himself together. But it wasn't going to happen. He was so tired. So spent. So terrified and sad and—

His cell phone vibrated from the nightstand, its buzz startling him just enough that he flinched. He held back a curse and glanced toward the phone. Shaina's name was lit up on the display, and he breathed a silent sigh of relief as he moved to the nightstand and picked up the phone. Bri still hadn't moved, though he took a second to watch her chest rise and fall rhythmically. Then he slowly lowered himself into the armchair again as he swiped up to answer and lifted the phone to his ear.

"Hey, Shai," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Hey." Her single-word greeting sounded so familiar and comforting that Ash found himself blinking back a new set of tears. He heard some rustling on the other end of the line and then what sounded like a door shutting. "You know, texting me to say 'fuck, it's snowing so hard I can't see' and then ghosting me for *hours* is really, really not cool."

He held in a snort of laughter through his tears, and he sniffled quietly as he wiped his cheeks. "I'm sorry, Shai. I've been . . . exhausted. I *am* exhausted. Bri *just* went down."

"God, Ash, seriously—where the hell are you? My mom said they shut down I-5 around five o'clock and I must've texted you a billion times since then and—"

"Shai!" Ash whisper-yelled into the phone, his stomach sinking as he heard a small noise from the bassinet. But when he glanced over at Bri again, she was still sleeping peacefully. He closed his eyes, leaned back in the chair, and let out a sigh. "I'm sorry, okay?" he said, still keeping his voice low. "I'm sorry, I should have called you but . . . but it was bad. Like, really, really bad. And I'm still shaky."

"But you're okay?"

"Yeah, of course. Yeah. Sorry. I—oh god—" All the air left his lungs, and he gasped as he leaned forward, suddenly realizing what he'd done, how much he'd made her worry. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have called or texted earlier. I'm sorry. Yes, we're okay, and we're safe. We got off the freeway almost as soon as it started snowing, and we're at, um, I think it's a Hilton-something-or-another in south Redding. The freeway's shut down right at this exit. There's like a foot of snow already, and—and god, I'm so sorry."

Bri whimpered and let out a weak half-cry from her bassinet, and Ash sniffled as he jumped up from the chair. His stomach ached, but he ignored it, and he didn't hesitate as he stuck the phone between his shoulder and ear

and then reached out and gently lifted his niece. He murmured quiet words to her and cradled her close.

"Is . . . is *she* okay too?" Shaina asked, but this time, Ash could hear the slight tremble in her voice.

"Yeah," he said softly. "Yeah, she's fine. She's just as exhausted as I am, I think. She's still sleeping, but she just fell asleep a few minutes ago, after . . ."

He trailed off, part of him not wanting to admit just how terrible the whole afternoon had been and just how wholly unprepared he was for all of this. They'd had to stop many more times than he'd expected. Usually for diaper changes—so, so many super-messy diaper changes. And he'd realized after about the third stop that he hadn't packed nearly enough changes of clothes for Bri—because her diapers apparently hadn't been sufficient to contain everything. He'd spent more time than he cared to admit digging through boxes packed in the back of the U-Haul trailer he was towing—all that time in the freezing cold while holding a half-naked four-month-old baby wrapped up in multiple blankets to keep her warm. Trying not to cry.

And then, when the snow had started just before they'd reached Redding, his plan to try to make it to Medford before stopping for the night had slammed to a halt. He hated driving in the snow. And going through the Siskiyous, hauling a trailer behind his capable-but-not-really Rav-4? With a four-month-old baby having stomach issues? While it was snowing?

Bad idea.

So they'd pulled off as soon as he'd seen a hotel. Not more than an hour later, six inches of snow had piled up, and by around eight o'clock, I-5 had been closed.

Shaina was quiet, and Ash let out a short breath and settled back down in the armchair, still carefully holding Bri. "I-I mean"—he gazed down at the sleeping baby, and his heart clenched, again—"it's been a rough day."

"I can just imagine. I'm so sorry, Ash," Shaina said softly, all hints of teasing and irritation now gone from her voice. "I wish I'd been able to drive up there with you. Stupid finals."

Ash forced a quiet laugh and closed his eyes. "The timing does suck," he admitted. "Although I guess we're lucky your finals are earlier than mine?" He paused and let out a short breath. "And have I reminded you lately how wonderful you are?"

He heard Shaina huff what sounded like a laugh of her own. “Well, I think it’s been at least a day, so, you know, you’re totally due to remind me again.”

“You’re the best, Shai.” He meant it. She was. “It was great to see you, and I miss you already. And I miss—I miss—”

God, why did everything have to be so raw still? He was nearly shaking, sick to his stomach.

“I know, Ash. Me too. But remember, you’re not alone. Okay? You’re __”

“It feels like I am, though,” he cut in, his voice much louder than he’d intended. “I’m here alone right now. Alone in this stupid hotel room with my niece because my sister—my sister’s gone. And my parents too. Why did she have to die, Shai? Why? I don’t—I don’t understand.”

Bri woke then, because Ash was an idiot and shouldn’t have spouted off all of that nonsense so loudly when she was finally sleeping. She whimpered and then let out a long wail, her face turning red and her eyes scrunched closed.

“Shh, shh, no, no, don’t cry, baby girl,” he murmured as he stood up, balancing the phone between his ear and shoulder so he could shift Bri to what he hoped would be a more comfortable position. He sighed with both frustration and exhaustion. “Sorry, Shai, I gotta go,” he said after Bri finished a second wail that was thankfully not quite as loud as the first.

“Yeah, okay. Love you. Call me in the morning. Please.”

“I promise.”

“Good night, Ash.”

“Night, Shai.”

He hung up and shoved the phone back in his pocket. Then he rocked baby Bri in his arms as he turned toward the bed. “Don’t you want to sleep in your nice bassinet? Please. Pretty, pretty please.”

She’d quieted down again, but the moment he started to lower her into the bassinet, she began to cry. Or, rather, threaten to cry—her face turning pink and her bottom lip pouting out.

“Ahh, okay, no bassinet. Okay, okay.” Ash brought her back up to his shoulder and straightened, closing his eyes. And he continued murmuring to her quietly, swaying in place, trying desperately to keep *himself* from crying again too. He eyed the bed longingly.

God, he was so, so tired. He just wanted to close his eyes for a little bit. Even just a half hour. Just *something*. Briefly, he considered lying down with her on the bed. She'd be close to him, and maybe she'd like that more. But he didn't trust himself not to . . . what? Roll over on her? That would be absolutely terrible.

People did it all the time, though, didn't they? Cosleeping, it was called?

But he moved a lot when he slept, and he tended to be a heavy sleeper. That seemed like a recipe for disaster, and that was the last thing he needed.

Screwing his eyes shut, he continued to sway slightly, hoping maybe that would lull her into a deeper sleep and he'd eventually feel brave enough to try setting her down in the bassinet again.

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*Brendan (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 6:54 a.m.):* Yo, Cass! Get your ass out of bed and get down here! Bring your dad’s truck and the chains. It’s bad out here, man

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# Chapter Four

## *Cass*

GRUNTING, CASS STRAIGHTENED UP and stepped back away from the front of the small blue sedan, the snow crunching under his boots. Old Mrs. Willoughby sat in the driver's seat, gripping her steering wheel tightly, and he gave her a reassuring smile as he jogged over to her half-open window. Why she'd decided she'd needed to venture out from her safe, warm house on a day like today—when the roads were dangerously slick with multiple layers of ice and snow from the major storm that had blasted through the region yesterday and last night—Cass had no idea. But he'd help her anyway, get her back on the road and hope she could make it the mile or so to her house.

Cass set a hand on the roof of her car and bent over slightly so it was easier to talk to her.

"Alright, Mrs. Willoughby, Brendan's going to drive slowly. Make sure to keep your foot off the brake pedal until you see his brake lights, and do your best to steer straight, but don't worry because his truck will pull you in the right direction, back onto the road. Okay?"

"Yes, yes, thank you so much," the older woman said, shaking her head slightly. "I should have listened to the TV. They said it was bad. But I just needed to get Vincent his prescription. He ran out of his pills, you see. He's going to be upset when I come back empty-handed."

Cass frowned. "Mr. Pugliano?"

“Yes, that’s right. Vincent’s got hypertension, you know. And he can’t drive, so I always pick up his prescriptions for him from the Walgreens. But it’s just not safe out here, is it?”

“No, ma’am, it’s definitely not,” Cass replied, glancing over his shoulder in the direction Mrs. Willoughby had been headed. The Walgreens was down the road about a mile, in the direction opposite the older woman’s house.

“Oh, how am I going to tell him?”

She sounded legitimately upset, and Cass sighed inwardly. He was happy to help, really. But he was beyond exhausted. He and his buddy Brendan had spent the last three and a half hours driving around town, pulling people out of ditches and snow drifts. That had been taxing enough in itself without even considering how little sleep he’d gotten the night before, waiting and waiting and waiting for his dad to call or text or . . . something.

It had been just after two in the morning when his dad had finally gotten home, thanks to both the state of emergency the city was in and the poor road conditions. And by the time Cass had finally collapsed into bed, it had been almost 3:00 a.m.

“Tell you what, Mrs. Willoughby, after Brendan pulls you out here and you get back on the road, I’ll head down to the pharmacy for you and pick up Mr. Pugliano’s prescription. How’s that?”

That made the older woman smile. “Oh, dear, that would be wonderful of you. Thank you. I just know he’ll appreciate that as much as I do.”

Cass didn’t doubt that, though he knew Mr. Pugliano would have an interesting way of showing his appreciation. A scowl and a grumble and probably a door slammed in Cass’s face. But then a few days later, Cass would get a nice letter in the mail and some . . . odd trinket. Last time he’d done something for Mr. Pugliano—mowed his lawn, maybe?—the man had mailed him three rusty old coins and a silver heart-shaped locket with a photograph of a poodle on the inside.

With a nod, Cass reminded Mrs. Willoughby again about what to do, then stepped away from her car and glanced toward Brendan’s truck. He lifted his hand to signal that Brendan was safe to pull forward, and he stood by, tucking his hands under his arms to keep them warm, as he watched the towing strap tighten and the sedan slowly inch forward until it was no longer stuck in the snow alongside the road. When it was safely back on the

road, now pointed in the correct direction, Brendan stopped, and Cass jogged up to unhook the towing strap.

Moments later, Mrs. Willoughby was on her way back home, and Cass leaned against the driver's side door of Brendan's pickup and shook his head.

"I'm freezing, man. What do you think? Things have slowed down enough?"

"Fuck, I hope so," Brendan said, taking off his gloves and tossing them onto the seat next to him. "I mean, probably? I think we've done as much as we can. Hopefully everyone's gotten the message to just stay the fuck home. Why the hell they opened up the freeway, I've got no clue. It can't be safe."

Cass nodded in agreement and pushed himself away from Brendan's truck, frowning again. He hoped everything cleared up soon. There was no more snow in the immediate forecast, but the meteorologists had already been wrong about this storm several times, and so he really couldn't make any predictions. Plus, the temperatures were expected to stay in the low-to-mid-twenties for the next couple of days, and there wouldn't really be much chance for the layers of ice and snow to melt.

"I don't think I've seen anything this bad in years. Thanks for texting me, though. I'm glad we could help out like this."

"Yeah, yeah, man. It's good work we do. Even if I think these people are morons for trying to drive in this shit, they don't deserve to wait hours for a tow truck," Brendan said with a laugh. His phone chimed, and he groaned and grabbed it from the dashboard, swiping at the screen. "Ah, fuck. Laurie's asking when I'll be home. I'd better go. We still on for drinks tomorrow night, assuming the weather doesn't take another turn?"

Although he tried a little more than halfheartedly, Cass was unable to hold back a grimace, and Brendan grinned.

"Yeah, okay, I deserve that look. We'll go to someplace a little classier this time. That dump of a bar Jon suggested was pretty awful."

"Pretty awful?" Cass raised his eyebrows and shook his head. "I'm still trying to get the cigarette smell out of my clothes. And places like that are just . . . eh, not my jam, you know?"

"Yeah, sorry about that, man. We'll go to Pete's or Westside or something this time? Dinner and drinks, not just a shitty dive bar. And it'll be on me. Sound better?"

Cass laughed but nodded. “Yeah, okay. Just . . . my dad’s schedule is all off with everything going on, so I’ll have to check with him first. Text me, and I’ll let you know.”

“Alright. Thanks again, Cass. See ya, hopefully tomorrow.” With a final nod, Brendan rolled up his window and then pulled his truck onto the road and drove off.

A stiff gust of bitterly cold air blew, and Cass cursed quietly as he reached up and adjusted his beanie, then stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat. He spun around and jogged back to his dad’s truck, which he’d left parked along the edge of the road, hazard lights flashing, while they’d been helping Mrs. Willoughby.

He yanked the door open and almost groaned with relief at the rush of hot air that hit him. Best decision he’d made all morning to leave the truck running and the heater on full blast. He’d let himself feel mildly guilty for wasting the fuel later, when he was home and tucked away in his warm bed, reading a book. Not out here freezing his ass off.

Quickly, he climbed up into the cab, shut the door behind him, and tugged off his gloves. Despite the gloves, his fingers were numb, and he shoved his hands in front of the vents until the feeling had returned. Then he took a minute to check his phone.

Which he instantly wished he’d done before his unnecessarily long conversation with Brendan.

He hit a few buttons on the screen and then lifted the phone to his ear. It rang only once before his dad picked up, the familiar gruff voice greeting him—or actually skipping the greeting altogether.

“Cass, finally. You gonna be home soon?”

Guilt hit him hard, and he reached up to rub his eyes. “Yeah, sorry, Dad. I thought you weren’t working today, and it’s a still mess out here, with everyone getting stuck, but I—”

“Goddamn snow. People can’t just stay home, can they?” There was a laugh on the other end, but Cass heard no humor in it. “No, you’re fine, kiddo. Take your time. And I’m not working today. Your mom’s just worried sick about you. You know how she gets when it snows.”

Cass closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the headrest. He did know how she was, and he cursed to himself again for not being more considerate. He should have called sooner, and now he had an additional obligation to run to Walgreens for the neighbor. And everything took at least

twice as long because of the road conditions. He wanted to smack himself. Instead, he just took a deep breath.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m sorry, Dad. Um, I’ve still got one more errand to run for Mr. Pugliano, but I shouldn’t be much longer,” he said, hoping to hell he was right. “Tell Mom I’m—ah, actually, do you want me to talk to her for a few minutes? Would that help?”

“Hmm. Yeah, let’s do that. One sec . . .” There was some muffled rustling and then his dad’s voice speaking gently to his mom with a tenderness he seemed to have reserved only for her.

Cass pursed his lips and felt tears pricking at the corners of his eyes, though he quickly blinked them away.

“Caspian?”

“Hi, ma. Sorry I’m still out, but you know old Mrs. Willoughby . . .”

For the next several minutes, he sat in his dad’s truck on the side of the road, letting his hands warm all the way back up as he told his mom stories from that morning, leaving out any parts that might have gotten her more worried. Like when someone had lost control of their vehicle and careened right through an intersection, almost smashing into him as he’d been hooking up Jim Hailstone’s Toyota to Brendan’s truck. And when they’d had to call an ambulance for Cindy Parker, who’d slipped on the ice getting out of her car at the grocery store.

Those were stories his mom didn’t need to hear about.

When he was finished, she seemed much more at ease, and she told him how much she loved him and how proud she was that he was helping out his community. And there was a smile to her voice now. A tired smile, but a smile nonetheless. He latched onto that, wishing he could be there with her to see it right then. But he still needed to run that extra errand, and he reminded her of that before speaking briefly with his dad again and then hanging up.

For a moment, he just sat there, his hands resting on the steering wheel and his eyes closed lightly, and he tried not to let the heaviness of everything overwhelm him. He tried to look on the bright side, focus on the positive, let that uplifting bit at the end of their conversation actually uplift him. But it was just like the whole last couple of weeks, when he’d been struggling so much to keep himself feeling upbeat.

Hanging on by a thread.

He hated that image because it was too easy to picture something—*anything*—coming along and severing that thread without any effort at all. And that would leave him tumbling, falling, drowning. Which he absolutely couldn't let happen. His parents needed him too much.

With a final sigh, he reached up and shifted the old pickup into drive, then carefully flipped a U-turn and headed west toward Walgreens.

Thankfully, the small drugstore was nearly empty; only one employee was there manning the cash register, and the pharmacist in the back had no other customers and was able to help Cass right away. Cass did have to make a quick phone call to Mr. Pugliano to get his order number and birth date—which included much snarling and humbugging and then a rather abrupt hang up on Mr. Pugliano's part. But not more than five minutes later, Cass was walking back out the door with the prescription in his hand, relieved that he'd be home sooner than he'd expected.

Even though he was confident his mom knew he was safe, he still didn't want to leave her worrying any longer than necessary.

He climbed back into the truck and set the prescription on the passenger seat, and just as he was sticking the keys in the ignition, his cell phone vibrated in his pocket. With a groan, he fished it out, surprised to see Brendan's name pop up on the screen. Frowning, he swiped to answer and brought the phone to his ear.

"Hey, what's up?" Cass asked, reaching out and turning the key. The old pickup roared to life.

"Hey, man, sorry. Are you still out?"

Cass suppressed another groan. "Yeah, just finished up at Walgreens and was about to head home."

"Oh, good. Look, Claire just called. You remember her? She's Laurie's friend who tried to—"

"—hit on me at the bar last week," Cass cut in, rolling his eyes at the memory. "Yeah, I remember. I thought she got the message that I'm not interested? Look, I've gotta get home, so—"

"Yah, I know, shut up and listen for a minute, will ya? She works at the Denny's right there, called me 'cause she knew we were helping out earlier. Apparently, there's a car that just got stuck on the off-ramp, hauling a little U-Haul something-or-another that slid a bit off the road. Can you help? Should be quick. I mean, I hope. I'd do it myself, but Laurie's anxious 'cause the power just went out."

“Oh, shit, the power’s out?”

“Only in my little corner of the neighborhood. Your house is fine, I’m sure. Anyway, can you?”

Cass sighed and glanced over at Mr. Pugliano’s prescription bag sitting on the passenger seat. What was one more good deed? He closed his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll do it. Thanks for the call, man.”

“Yeah. Be careful, okay?”

“Of course.”

With another sigh, Cass hung up the phone and set it on the dash, wondering when the thread he was just barely hanging onto was going to break for good. A moment later, he was back on the main road, headed toward the freeway, resigned to helping yet another poor victim of the nasty weather.

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*Henry (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 9:52 a.m.):* Good morning, kiddo! Hope you're doing a little better today. Shaina said you were planning to get back on the road since they opened up the freeway, but I'm hearing it's still iffy, especially heading north into the mountains. Maybe you should stay put at that hotel for another day or so and let them clear the roads more. Give me a call, okay? Stay safe.

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# Chapter Five

## Ash

NOTHING WAS GOING RIGHT. Nothing at all.

Not with Bri, not with the road conditions, and not with the abysmal towing ability of his small SUV.

Not that Ash could blame any of those things, especially not Bri. After all, he was the one who'd made a string of bad decisions, one after another, including the stupidest decision he'd probably ever made—the decision to leave the relative safety of the hotel this morning.

He'd packed everything up, checked out of their room, and tucked a somehow-finally-asleep-again Bri safely in her car seat, all while trying to ignore the uncomfortable knot in his stomach telling him the roads were still dangerous and to forget that he was going on only about two hours of less-than-restful sleep himself.

He should have listened to his gut.

Bri had woken up nearly as soon as he'd started driving, and her quiet whimpers and gurgles had quickly turned to full-on wailing. On top of that, the roads were worse than awful, barely plowed and still covered in layers of ice and snow that hadn't melted. And although his car was supposed to be all-wheel drive, it had started losing traction all over the place, slipping and sliding and generally making him assume they were both about to die.

He'd been so overwhelmed and so downright terrified that he'd been unable to breathe right, and he'd taken the very next off-ramp on the

freeway. One exit. They'd made it all of *one exit* farther on their route. And then . . .

"Dammit," he hissed, squeezing his eyes shut as he gripped the steering wheel and tried not to cry. Again.

God, he was stupid. Stupid and alone and stuck here in the snow. His car wouldn't move—or hell, maybe he just was such an awful driver that he had no idea how to *get* it to move—and Bri was still screaming from the back seat. And since he was a lousy uncle and had no idea what he was doing, he didn't know whether she was hungry or needed a diaper change or whether she was just cranky since *she* also hadn't slept enough.

He bit his lip and forced his eyes back open. He was at the end of the off-ramp, stopped at the red light, but the front of his car was a good several feet into the intersection, and the trailer . . . Another wave of something very unpleasant rolled through his stomach as he glanced in the passenger side mirror. The trailer's tire on that side was now partly buried in snow after the trailer had slid sideways off the road when he'd tried to stop. He was lucky the little trailer hadn't pulled his car right along with it or pushed the car farther into the intersection.

"Dammit," he muttered again, and somehow, Bri seemed to sense his mood, because she began wailing more, louder now. Guilt and shame rushed through his chest, and Ash sucked in a breath and closed his eyes. He needed to do better. "I'm sorry, sweet girl. Please don't cry. I'll—I'll figure this out. S-somehow. Shh, shh."

Tears slipped out, even with his eyes squeezed shut, and he released one hand from the steering wheel long enough to wipe them away. Bri continued crying, though not quite as loudly, and ahead of Ash, the stoplight changed to green. He clenched his jaw and blinked back more tears. Then he took his foot off the brake and tried again. But just as with the previous three green lights, the tires spun, and the vehicle didn't move. And his leg started shaking badly as a new wave of panic rolled through him.

Quickly, he shifted his foot back to the brake pedal, pushing down on it as hard as he could, and then put the SUV in park and reached out to turn on his hazard lights. No one had come up behind him yet, but it was just a matter of time. And then what? God, what should he do? Still gripping the steering wheel, his knuckles now white, he leaned forward to rest his forehead on his hands. His lower lip trembled as he kept trying to hold back his tears. But no matter how hard he scrunched his eyes shut, he couldn't

stop them. Or the flood of intrusive thoughts, reminding him how completely alone he was.

Quietly, he started talking to his niece again, even as he kept his eyes closed and his forehead resting on his hands, because dammit if he was going to let Bri ever think she was alone too. His mumbling was probably pretty incoherent, but after another moment, she finally stopped crying, like maybe she understood that he was trying to comfort her at least.

He held his breath, waiting for her to start back up, and when she didn't, he sniffled and lifted his head. The light was red again. And he still had no idea what to do.

Behind him, a silver sedan drove up. As though he wasn't even there and the snow wasn't even a thing, the driver passed him on his left and then made a right turn out in front of him and continued along on the road.

Ash swallowed hard. One more try. Maybe. And then . . . god, he didn't even know what. He'd get out and try to shovel the snow away from the trailer tire with a shovel he didn't have? Or with his hands? That sure sounded like a stupid idea. Maybe he should call a tow truck? But given the road conditions, that seemed like a pretty terrible idea as well.

He couldn't think, and he didn't know what to do or what not to do. His hands tingled, his grip on the steering wheel now feeling looser, like he didn't even have the strength to hold it. And his head throbbed, something worse than just a lack-of-sleep headache, he could feel it already. Probably another migraine brewing, like he'd had last week and the week before. Stress-induced migraines, the doctor had called them. Just what he really, really didn't need right now.

He was about to shift the SUV back into drive, give himself one more try, when an older white pickup truck drove slowly through the intersection ahead of him and then flipped around and pulled up along the curb to his right. The truck's hazard lights started flashing, and the driver jumped out and jogged confidently toward him, navigating the snow and ice with care but ease.

Some odd feeling of relief and embarrassment rippled through Ash's chest as the man angled around the front of the SUV and then flashed him a reassuring grin. He closed his eyes and tried to steady his breathing as he let go of the steering wheel and reached over to roll the window down.

"Hey, there!" the stranger greeted, his voice deep and soft and kind. "Looks like you could use a hand?" The man rested his elbow against the

top of Ash's car and smiled at him again—a kind smile, just like the man's voice and eyes.

Another wave of relief hit Ash, and he nodded weakly. "Uh, y-yeah, I—"

Before Ash could finish his answer, Bri piped in with another of her piercing cries. Ash flinched at the sound and screwed his eyes shut again.

"S-sorry, she's, well, it's been a rough morning, and she's probably hungry, and I know she's tired, and . . ." Ash trailed off, his face heating up with embarrassment as Bri continued crying from the back seat. He should probably just admit right now that he was likely the worst uncle ever and that he had no idea what he was doing.

But the man seemed to take everything in stride. "Well, let's see if we can get you off the road so you can get her whatever she needs, huh?"

"I-I don't know—it's stuck, I can't get it to move, and the trailer too," Ash mumbled. His chest felt tight, and he looked up at the man, who just smiled softly and shook his head.

"I've been doing this all morning. Believe me, you're not the first to get stuck. Although, maybe the first hauling a trailer *and* with a baby in the car. You're not from around here?"

Ash laughed and shook his head. "No, I'm . . . I'm supposed to be heading home. To Seattle. My—I—" He reached up and wiped a tear from his cheek as the knot in his stomach tightened. "S-sorry, um . . ."

"Hey, no problem. Everything's gonna be fine, okay?" The man had leaned over slightly, and Ash felt another of those rushes of relief. "I'll help you out here, and you'll be fine. You're safe, and your daughter's safe too. Okay?"

Ash sucked in a strangled breath as the throbbing in his head intensified. He didn't need to correct the man and tell him Bri wasn't his daughter. But it was a reminder of why he was here. Right now. Driving up from Southern California hauling a trailer. With a four-month-old baby and no clue what the hell he was doing.

"Y-yeah, th-thanks, um . . ."

Ash glanced up at the man again. God, he looked so . . . kind. He was about Ash's age, maybe a little older, his dark hair mostly hidden by a navy-and-gray beanie with the word *Aggies* embroidered on the front. A thin layer of rough stubble covered his strong-cut jawline, and his smile and his deep-brown eyes were soft and caring.

The man gave a small nod. “I’ll hook you up to my truck and then get you unstuck, okay? And there are a few hotels right up the road here. Less than half a mile. It’s not far.”

The prospect of having to drive anymore *at all* made Ash’s insides churn, but he wanted to act strong, and so he just nodded. “Yeah, okay.”

With another grin that somehow lit up his eyes, too, the man hooked a thumb toward his truck. “I’ll just grab the tow strap. Hang tight, okay?” At Ash’s nod, the man started off toward his truck. But he stopped after a step or two and turned back around. “Uh, sorry, I just realized I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Cass.”

*Cass*. Ash blinked back tears, not entirely sure how to deal with all his emotions right then. Especially the one telling him that this man—Cass—was right, that everything *was* going to be okay. Because that was something his heart just couldn’t believe. How could it possibly be okay? How could *anything* ever possibly be okay again? Not with his sister—

He forced his eyes shut, blocking yet *more* tears. “Ash,” he rasped, his voice sounding hoarse and unfamiliar in some way, as though it didn’t really belong to him. “I’m—I’m Ash.”

“Nice to meet you, Ash,” Cass said in that same reassuring, soft tone. “I’ll be right back.”

Ash pursed his lips and nodded again. “Thank you.” And Bri wailed from the back seat, which earned a silly grin and chuckle from Cass just before he turned and jogged back across the snow and ice to his truck.

The next five minutes or so were a blur. Bri continued screaming from the back seat, clearly ready to *not* be in the car anymore, as Ash tried his best to follow the instructions Cass gave him while more than mildly panicking the whole time. He nearly cried with relief when the car and trailer finally moved a few feet forward. Once they were unstuck and straight, Cass stopped the truck, his hazard lights still flashing. Then he jumped out and jogged back to Ash’s window.

“See, piece of cake,” Cass declared with another smile. “Now, I’ll just unhook, and you should be able to—”

Bri’s cry cut through the car again, interrupting whatever Cass had been about to say. Ash clenched his jaw and scrunched his eyes closed as the pain in his head intensified, the throbbing ache turning into a sharp stabbing sensation that sliced right through the middle of his skull. Dammit. Why now?

A warm hand covered his on the steering wheel. “Hey, are you okay? The hotel’s just up the road, it’s not far, and . . . Ah, tell you what, how about you sit in the back with your daughter so—”

“She’s my niece. My niece. My—my sister’s daughter.” He was shaking again, his whole body now, and he felt lightheaded and vaguely dizzy. He pulled his hand out from under Cass’s and rubbed his eyes. God, his head hurt. “Th-the hotel is—is where?”

There was a brief pause before Cass answered. “Um, it’s just up the road here. But give me a minute, and I’ll park my truck, then I’ll come back and drive your car there. How does that sound? You can sit in the back with your niece. She probably just, uh, needs you to be with her.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can . . . I mean, I’ll be fine. I-I think.”

There was a light laugh, and when Ash risked a glance up, squinting through the pain of what he was now sure was a burgeoning migraine, he saw Cass grinning at him again, though there was still a softness and an overwhelming empathy in the man’s eyes.

“Are you sure about that? I mean, no offense, but you look like maybe you shouldn’t be driving. Plus, you know, it’s a bit uphill here and then again just before the turn onto Larkspur, so it’s maybe a little tricky with the ice and snow.” Cass reached up and adjusted his beanie, then glanced down the road, his expression tightening. But when he looked back at Ash a moment later, whatever Ash had seen in his expression was gone. “Let me help you?”

It was too much—the kindness of this complete stranger—and he couldn’t speak to answer. Instead, he nodded weakly, shifted the car back into park, and unfastened his seat belt. Cass opened the door for him.

“Be careful here, it’s slick,” Cass warned.

Ash nodded again and cleared his throat. “Yeah, um, thanks,” he said. Then, carefully—because the last thing he wanted to do right now was embarrass himself even more by slipping on the ice—he pushed himself up to stand, holding the car door to steady himself. Almost immediately, however, his vision swam, and he groaned and let go of the door to reach up and cover his eyes.

And that was a mistake.

He gasped as his feet slipped, and he somehow found his face pressed up against Cass’s puffy black jacket, two strong arms wrapped around him. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes.

“Whoa, now, I’ve got you, I’ve got you,” Cass murmured gently.

Ash couldn’t hold back the tears anymore. And he didn’t really want to. He stood there, leaning up against this total stranger in the middle of an intersection in Redding, California, shaking and dizzy, and he cried. He felt like an idiot. And the worst uncle in the world—after all, Bri was still screaming in the back seat of the car, still upset about something, still needing comfort. And he wasn’t doing a damn thing about it.

“Hey, hey, you’re okay. I’ve got you, and everything’s going to be okay. Really.”

*No, it’s not!* he wanted to shout. But he didn’t. He couldn’t. He just clung to the man and shook his head and willed the tears to stop. What seemed like several minutes later, when he could finally breathe again, he straightened up and wiped his face on his sleeve.

“I’m sorry. I’m . . . I’m having a really, really bad, um, month, actually, and I just . . .”

“It’s okay, really. I understand,” Cass said softly, and Ash wondered again where all this man’s kindness came from. “Here, we need to get you two somewhere warm and safe. Let me help you, okay?”

With a sniffle, Ash nodded. “Yeah, okay. Th-thank you, again. You don’t know how much all this means to me.”

He heard a quiet *hmm* from next to him, and when he glanced over at Cass, he saw more gentleness in the man’s eyes. “I’m happy to be able to help. Really. Here.” And Cass guided Ash to the rear driver’s side door, his hand on Ash’s elbow for support.

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*Dad (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 11:04 a.m.):* The power is out down the street but still on here. Everything's a mess though, and I might have to go back to work later

*Dad (11:06 a.m.):* Your mom is still worried about you. Let me know your ETA so I can tell her. Be careful

*Dad (11:07 a.m.):* Love you

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# Chapter Six

## Cass

CASS'S HEART WAS DOING some funny things in his chest and had been for the better part of the last fifteen minutes.

It had started the second Cass had locked eyes with the most captivating man he thought he'd ever seen—those deep blue eyes, the adorable mess of wavy dark hair that fell loosely over his forehead, the tiny hint of stubble along his jawline. The sensation had ripped through Cass, nearly pushing all the air out of his lungs as his heart had begun racing—really, really fast.

Then it had done some weird stuttering thing, skipping beats and such, when the man—*Ash*—had slipped on the ice and fallen right into Cass's arms.

Then it had ached with an intensity Cass had never known before when Ash had started crying. Clinging to him and crying as though he had nothing left in the world. As though Cass was his only lifeline.

And now, the racing and the stuttering and the ache had all turned into some gentle, slow flutter as Cass listened unobtrusively to the man in the back seat, who murmured soft, sweet words of reassurance to his niece. The infant, who couldn't have been more than three or four months old, responded with quiet coos and gurgles, her crying long forgotten.

Cass pursed his lips and blinked back whatever emotions were buzzing right underneath his skin, because now was certainly not the time to let himself be overwhelmed by these things. Then he carefully pulled Ash's Rav-4 alongside a huge snowdrift at the edge of the parking lot outside his

dad’s buddy’s hotel, where he hoped they’d have a nice, comfortable room for Ash and his niece.

He shifted the small SUV into park but left the engine running so the car would stay warm. Pasting a soft smile on his face, he twisted around until he could see Ash in the back seat. The man’s eyes seemed to be blinking back tears as he stared down at his niece, and there was a tightness in his jaw, even as the words he murmured were gentle and soothing.

“Here we are,” Cass said, keeping his voice quiet to avoid startling the baby.

Ash looked up at him briefly, and Cass’s heart nearly broke when he saw the redness rimming Ash’s eyes and the partly dried tear stains on his cheeks. Ash quickly blinked again and then glanced out the window toward the hotel’s entrance.

“My dad’s friend owns this hotel,” Cass continued. “How about I run in and check that they’ve got a room for you?”

His heart still ached as Ash’s eyes closed and Ash seemed to clear his throat with a low, rough cough.

“Yeah, um, that would be great. I-I can’t thank you enough,” Ash said, his words catching.

It was yet another thing that tugged at Cass’s heart. He pushed away the feeling and channeled all of his energy into giving Ash a huge, reassuring smile.

“I’m glad to help, really. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Ash nodded and then bit his lower lip as he reached up to swipe at a stray tear on his cheek. Then he went back to talking quietly to his niece, his words mostly nonsense but filled with what Cass could clearly hear as love and adoration.

The ache in his heart grew even more.

He pushed open the door, climbed out of the SUV, and closed the door behind himself as softly as he could. For whatever reason, the cold air of the late morning hit differently this time, and he pulled his coat around him as he walked briskly but carefully across the mostly empty parking lot. The lot, like the roads, was covered in a thick layer of slippery ice, despite the obvious effort they’d put into plowing, and Cass frowned as he imagined Ash trying to drive in this, especially on the freeway and especially with a crying baby in the back seat—precious, precious cargo. The car had actually handled pretty well from where Cass had taken over at the off-ramp to the

hotel, but if he hadn’t been a confident driver or he’d had any major stresses or distractions . . .

Another wave of something—an ache, a yearning, maybe, he wasn’t even really sure—rippled through him, and he took a deep breath and blinked it all away again. Then he stepped through the doors to the hotel, the outside cold giving way to a pleasant warmth, and smiled as he offered a small wave to the older man at the front desk.

“Mr. Parsons, hi there, sir!”

The man looked up and grinned back. “Caspian, good to see you, kiddo!” He glanced past Cass out toward the parking lot curiously. “That’s not your car, though. And hauling a trailer in this weather? You’re not leaving, are you? Last I heard, your dad said you were staying here in Redding to help out with your mom?”

“Ah, yessir, that’s still my plan,” Cass replied with a short nod. “I’ve just been driving around helping out people who’ve gotten stuck in the snow, and this man and his niece were stuck back at the freeway off-ramp. He could really use a room, at least for the night. Maybe another night or two, even, depending on what the roads look like.”

Mr. Parsons nodded with a smile. “A little too confident about driving, huh? The roads are awful this morning.”

“I think it might have been more wishful thinking on his part,” Cass said, shaking his head slightly. In truth, he had no idea why Ash would have been trying to get through the mountains with the roads covered in ice. And it really wasn’t any of his business. But he smiled and arched both eyebrows in question. “So, uh, do you have a room, then?”

“Sure do. We were nearly full last night, but when they reopened the freeway . . . ah, well, I hope people have their chains handy. There aren’t a lot of safe places to stop after they get a few more exits north.”

“It’s dangerous out there,” Cass agreed. With another shake of his head, he hooked a thumb back toward the front entrance. “I’ll go let him know you’ve got a room. Be right back.”

Mr. Parsons nodded and then turned to his computer as Cass spun around and jogged back out the doors, pausing briefly as they opened automatically in front of him.

The cold air blasted him again, but this time, he was thankful for it. Because as soon as he saw Ash watching him through the back window of the car, his cheeks heated up and some flush of warmth spread through him.

He swallowed hard. What was wrong with him? He'd seen good-looking men before, of course. But he'd never had a reaction like this, where his heart was having so much trouble keeping its rhythm.

Then again, he'd never seen such intense and expressive blue eyes before, either.

Not that it mattered. Ash was only driving through, and Cass wasn't looking for a hookup. That wasn't him.

Besides, the man had an infant with him. And he was probably already in a relationship. Or he was straight. Or whatever.

Cass made sure that the smile on his face was as soft as possible, and he gave a nod as he approached the vehicle. He saw Ash blink and force a small smile.

That certainly didn't help his predicament.

The small smile from Ash only stoked whatever fire had started burning in his belly about twenty minutes ago, when he'd first seen the man. At the same time, there was another ache, a longing now. Because he just *knew* that wasn't Ash's real smile.

No, there was a sadness—or maybe grief, even?—in Ash's eyes.

Cass was almost overcome with a sudden desperation to see that sadness gone, to see the real smile hiding behind the dullness.

Holding back what he was sure would be a much-too-eager-looking smile of his own, Cass reached ahead of him to open up the driver's side rear door. Ash was sitting about in the middle of the back seat, and when their eyes met, Ash almost immediately blinked and looked away, turning toward his niece, who made some quiet gurgle and kicked her feet.

"They have rooms?" Ash asked softly, and then, with a gentle hum, he leaned in closer to the baby and settled his hand about over the middle of her chest. "Shh, shh, sweet girl. I know, I know."

It was such a precious thing to watch—Ash comforting his niece—and Cass suddenly felt like an intruder, as though he were witnessing some private moment that he had no business being a part of. Another rush of fluttering warmth hit him as he watched Ash brush his fingers across the baby's forehead.

And the baby seemed to let out a long breath. She closed her eyes, and Ash glanced back over at him, his eyebrows knitted together with concern.

Cass swallowed again and nodded stiffly. "Yeah, um"—he cleared his throat—"they have rooms, it's no problem."

Ash held Cass's gaze this time, and his eyes seemed to glisten as he pursed his lips together. Then he looked away. "I'm an idiot for even trying to drive this morning," he said quietly, and he let out some sort of dry laugh and began to scoot over toward Cass to get out of the car. "God, Shaina's going to kill me when she finds out."

"Shaina is your sister?" Cass asked, shifting back a step to give Ash room. But then Ash seemed to freeze, and the tears Cass had seen Ash so bravely holding back tumbled right out and down his cheeks as Ash screwed his eyes shut and shook his head.

"No." With a sniffle, Ash reached up and wiped his cheeks. "No, she's just—"

Something seemed to snap, Cass could almost feel it—a sudden tension in the air—and Ash lowered his head into his hands and sucked in a sharp breath.

Ah, damn.

He wasn't sure what he'd said, but whatever it was hadn't been the right thing. Silently cursing himself, Cass moved closer and hesitated only for half a second before reaching out and setting his hand gently on Ash's shoulder. With a light squeeze, Cass cleared his throat. "Let's get you inside, huh? Before your niece gets too cold?" When Ash nodded slightly, Cass squeezed his shoulder again and then backed up. "Do you have a bag? I can carry that for you, and you can just worry about . . . What's her name?"

Ash looked up at him, his mouth set in a tight frown. The tears still fell down his cheeks, but he seemed to ignore them, and his lower lip trembled as he spoke. "Bri. Uh, Brielle Rose. But we—we call her Bri."

A shudder of some deep emotion Cass couldn't even identify rocked him then, and Cass let his gaze drift over to the infant, whose eyes were still closed lightly. He smiled softly. "She's beautiful, really," he murmured, and when he looked back at Ash, Ash was just nodding and wiping his cheeks again. Cass bit his lip. "So, um, you want to get her, and I'll turn off your car here and get your luggage and diaper bag and whatever else you need?"

"Yeah, um, okay. M-my stuff is . . ." Ash motioned vaguely toward the hatch of the small SUV, and Cass nodded.

"Sure, yeah. Be careful here, okay? It's slippery."

"Yeah. I-I'm sorry about earlier," Ash said, and when his eyes met Cass's this time, it seemed like maybe there was a hint of something else in

them. Ash seemed to force another smile. “I’ll, uh, be more careful this time, since you probably won’t be able to catch me with your arms full of luggage and stuff.”

A quiet huff of laughter escaped Cass, and he shook his head as his grin widened. “Probably not. Yeah. Best if you stay on your feet this time?”

“Yeah, that’s probably best.” Ash’s lips twitched up in a little bit bigger of a smile, and god, it was just enough. Cass’s heart reacted—stuttering and jumping around in his chest—and there was this immediate feeling of some fluttering warmth that was pleasant and wholly unfamiliar to him.

He ignored it, because that was what he needed to do. And he gave Ash one more nod before he moved to turn off the car and grab Ash’s bags.

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*Shaina (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 11:23 a.m.):* Don’t tell me. I don’t even want to know, do I?

*Shaina (11:25 a.m.):* Scratch that. Tell me. I absolutely do want to know. You decided to stay put because the roads are still bad, right? Because that’s what you should have done

*Shaina (11:31 a.m.):* ASH!

*Shaina (11:31 a.m.):* Just let me know you’re okay. Please

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# Chapter Seven

## Ash

ASH CHEWED ON HIS lower lip as he signed the hotel registration form with a shaking hand, trying to ignore the knot twisting painfully in his gut. It wasn't *really* a big deal, putting another few hundred dollars on his credit card. In the grand scheme of things, that wasn't what was really important. What was important was making sure Bri stayed safe. And it definitely wasn't safe to be driving right now.

Maybe if he'd been a more competent driver, it would be different. He could be on the road now, halfway through the Siskiyous and almost to Oregon.

Or maybe if he'd left a day sooner, he'd have avoided the stupid snow and ice altogether. Or if he'd just stayed with Shaina and her parents for *one more day*.

Or maybe—maybe if his sister was still alive . . .

Dammit.

*"Shaina is your sister?"*

The horrible pain of his grief ripped through him, and he closed his eyes as he set the pen down and pushed the form back across the counter. "Here you go. I-I hope I'll just have to stay the one night, but—but if, uh . . ."

He trailed off but forced his eyes open. The man behind the counter—whose name tag read *George*—gave him a kind nod and then took the form and started typing on the computer again.

“Don’t worry,” the man said. “The room will be available tomorrow as well. Just let us know before checkout time if you plan to stay. It won’t be a problem, Mr. Finnley.”

Ash nodded, though his jaw was still clenched and, like most of the day today, he was still fighting tears. The shaking hadn’t stopped, either, even now—even standing here, with neither him nor Bri in any kind of danger.

He glanced sideways at where Cass now knelt next to Bri’s car seat. The infant was still asleep—thank goodness—but she’d somehow latched onto Cass’s pinky finger and didn’t seem to want to let go. Cass lifted his eyes and gave Ash the kindest smile.

God, he was so thankful. If not for this random stranger and his kindness . . .

Bri made a small noise, and Cass’s lips twitched up in another smile before he glanced back down at the baby. And something raw and unfamiliar tugged at Ash’s heart.

“Alright, Mr. Finnley, you’re all set,” George said. Ash pulled his gaze away from Cass and Bri, and that funny feeling disappeared. “Here’s your driver’s license and credit card back. And here are your keys. Room number two eleven. The elevator’s over there to your right. Do you need help with your luggage?”

“Um . . .”

From next to him, Cass stood up, apparently having successfully extricated his pinky finger from the sleeping baby. He cleared his throat. “I can help, if you want.” He seemed poised to say more, but then he just pursed his lips and smiled again, a tight sort of uncertain smile this time. “I mean, I’ll carry your bags for you.”

“No, no, you’ve already done so much.” Ash’s cheeks heated up with embarrassment. He reached out and grabbed the key cards and his driver’s license and credit card and then shoved everything into his coat pocket. “I-I should, um . . .”

He trailed off again. Right. What was he supposed to do? He couldn’t take Bri up to the room and then leave her there to come back and get the luggage. And he couldn’t carry everything. Could he?

“It’s no big deal, really,” Cass said, and when Ash glanced back up at him, the man was already bending over to pick up Ash’s duffle bag and Bri’s diaper bag. He set both on top of Ash’s suitcase and then tilted his head toward the elevators. “I’ll follow you. Thanks, Mr. Parsons!”

“Of course, Caspian! Tell your dad I said hello.”

*Caspian.*

“Will do, sir.”

Ash stared at Cass for an extra half second, trying to get his brain to work so he could say something intelligent, thank the man for his generosity and kindness. But a blurriness momentarily clouded his vision, reminding of the migraine that had been threatening him all morning. He blinked several times and then knelt down and picked up Bri’s car seat.

When she didn’t stir, just did that adorable half-suckle thing she always did when she was sleeping, Ash almost cried with relief. Maybe she’d finally get some decent rest, not just steal another few-minute nap. And then maybe he could rest too.

Silently, he gave Cass a small nod and turned to start toward the elevator, walking carefully to avoid jostling the car seat. Cass followed behind him a few steps, and when they stopped at the elevator a moment later, Cass reached ahead of them and pressed the up button.

The elevator doors opened almost immediately, and Ash wasn’t really surprised when Cass reached forward again and put his hand in front of the doors to keep them from closing prematurely.

“After you,” Cass said, his voice low.

Ash mumbled another thanks as he stepped onto the elevator ahead of Cass. Then he settled with his back against the wall. Cass followed.

“Second floor, yeah?” Cass asked, and when Ash gave a small nod, Cass pressed the number two button.

The elevator doors closed, and the elevator lurched as it began its ascent.

And then everything seemed to go wrong all at once as the space around him started to spin.

Ash screwed his eyes shut, fighting the sudden intense dizziness. With his free hand, he grabbed the railing along the wall of the elevator, and at the same time, his other hand tightened on the handle of Bri’s car seat.

“Dammit, what’s—what’s happening?” He seemed to be tilting sideways, or the world was, like gravity had broken and was pulling him over.

And just like earlier, Cass was right there at his side. A strong arm wrapped around Ash’s waist, and he let himself lean into Cass. But the feeling that the world was tilted and spinning only intensified.

“Hey, hey now, I’ve got you. I’ve got you,” Cass said, his tone as gentle as ever. There was a huff of warm air against the top of Ash’s head. “I thought we agreed you’d be staying on your feet from now on?”

“I-I . . .”

“You’re okay. Here, um . . .” Cass didn’t finish his sentence, but Ash felt the elevator lurch again, and then he was being guided forward. He followed blindly, his eyes still shut tight. They seemed to turn left and then left a second time, maybe. He couldn’t quite tell. A moment later, Cass stopped them, although his arm remained firmly around Ash’s midsection. “Here we are, two eleven. Do you have the key?”

“Yeah, yeah, I, uh . . . hang on.” Ash risked opening his eyes, although he immediately realized his mistake as his vision rippled and waved and sent a new sort of dizziness through him. He closed his eyes again with a groan. “I-I can’t, um . . .”

Cass’s arm tightened around him. “You’re okay, I’ve got you. Here we go . . .”

Ash wasn’t sure what happened next. Maybe Cass set down the luggage, because the next thing he knew, Cass was taking the car seat from him.

“I’ll hold Bri, and you get the key card out, okay?”

If he hadn’t been so completely incapable of . . . well, just about everything right then, he might have felt embarrassed. Instead, he felt even more gratitude. “Thank you, again,” he said, still leaning against Cass as he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out one of the key cards. “I, um . . .” He started to open his eyes, but then thought better of it. “Here, you should probably do this part too. I’m sorry, I’m not . . . I don’t know what’s happening. I mean, maybe I do, but—”

“It’s okay, really. Let’s get you inside,” Cass said. The key card was taken from his hand, and a moment later, Cass was guiding him forward again. “I’ve got Bri, and we’ll get both of you inside here, and then I’ll come back for your luggage.”

Ash nodded and continued to shuffle alongside Cass, every step feeling like he was falling more and more sideways. If he didn’t trust they were walking straight, he would assume they were turning, turning, turning. Tilting and falling.

He let out a short breath when they stopped, and he heard a quiet rustling, like Cass maybe set the car seat down.

“There we go, we made it. The bed is right in front of you now. Right here,” Cass murmured softly. And then Cass was shifting them, both of his hands moving to settle on Ash’s waist as he directed Ash to turn. The back of Ash’s knees hit the mattress, and he let out a short breath as he lowered himself to sit on the edge of the bed.

Immediately, he dropped his head down in between his knees and took several deep breaths, trying to regain his bearings. He was vaguely aware of Cass leaving his side briefly, the door to the hotel room opening and then closing, and Cass returning a moment later to set Ash’s luggage down next to the bed.

When Cass spoke again, his voice came from lower and a few feet in front of Ash, like he was squatting down or something. “There’s all your stuff. And Bri is still sleeping. How are you feeling now? Seems like vertigo, maybe? Has this ever happened before?”

Ash started to shake his head and then realized that was probably not a great idea. He did, however, manage to sit up a little, moving his hands to rest on either side of him on the bed. “Uh, no. But, um . . .”

“Sorry, I realize it’s none of my business,” Cass interjected when Ash didn’t finish his thought. “I’m just worried about leaving if you’re still unstable. Or—or not unstable. I mean, unsteady, maybe. Not unstable.”

Ash couldn’t help but laugh lightly at Cass’s fumbled words, and he opened his eyes partway to see Cass’s dark gaze full of concern and compassion. Something inside him rattled and seemed to break, and he sucked in a sharp breath and tried his best to ignore the pain.

“You know, I think unstable might be pretty accurate right about now,” Ash admitted, forcing a tight smile. He closed his eyes as another wave of that same odd dizziness hit him and the throbbing in his head seemed to ramp up another notch. “But, yeah, I haven’t ever had this happen before. Not like this anyway. Um, I just started having migraines a couple of weeks ago. This seems . . . related, probably.”

“Ah, that would explain it, yeah. Do you have medicine or anything?”

Did he? He did, right? But he couldn’t quite think straight, and his brain felt like it was spinning too. “Yeah, but I’m not supposed to take it,” he managed, though the words sounded funny.

“You have medicine you’re not supposed to take?”

He laughed again and looked down at Cass, whose eyebrows were raised in question. It had been a silly answer, hadn’t it? Ash tried for a silly

grin to match it, but he was sure it fell far short of the mark. “Yeah. It’s Imitrex. I’ve only taken it once, and it made me really, really sleepy. I wouldn’t feel comfortable taking it and . . . uh . . .”

“. . . and being in charge of your niece?” Cass finished for him.

Ash nodded. “Yeah. Exactly. But I haven’t had to—to be alone when—” His words weren’t working at all, and he shook his head once and then closed his eyes yet again. “I’m glad she’s sleeping now, and maybe I’ll be lucky—” Hah, right. Lucky him. Yeah, he was so, so lucky. “Ah, fuck.”

And just like that, more tears started to fall. He let them, as he had earlier when he’d slipped on the ice and Cass had caught him. Not that he had much control over it. He reached up and wiped his cheeks, and he shook his head one more time, trying to push away the pain of his grief. He couldn’t let it take over right now. He didn’t have the space for it.

A gentle hand came to rest on his shoulder, and it felt warm and soothing in some strange way he really didn’t understand. The bed shifted slightly, probably as Cass sat? He wasn’t sure.

“I can stay, if you need me to,” Cass offered, though there was something in his voice—a reluctance, maybe. Maybe because it was such a weird thing, offering to stay there and help Ash out. They were strangers, after all.

“I-I can’t ask that of you,” Ash mumbled. “I’m sure you have other things to do, and I’ve already taken so much of your time.” But even as he said the words, another low level of panic began to buzz in his chest.

*Alone.*

The single word brought on an unpleasant wave of sadness that he could barely hide. He forced himself to take a breath, even as his chest ached.

Facing things alone. God, how he didn’t want to. He just wanted everything to go back to the way it was, when all “alone” meant was that he’d have all Joanna’s care-package goodies to himself because Shaina and Ashlynn had both taken off to Los Angeles to attend UCLA while Ash had stayed up in Seattle.

That “alone” he could handle.

This new “alone” . . . it meant something entirely different.

*“You can handle this, big brother!”*

He heard her voice so clearly in his head, even feeling all out of sorts like he did. He could hear her voice and picture her smile. And god, he could still feel her hug. She gave *the best* hugs.

What he wouldn’t do for one more. Just one.

“I don’t mind, really.” Cass’s voice was quiet and caring, almost as though he knew Ash wasn’t *really* present. The hand on his shoulder squeezed lightly. “I’d really rather know you’re okay before I leave.”

Even though Ash knew what Cass meant—that “okay” meant not suffering from debilitating vertigo somehow related to this nasty migraine so he would be safe and could take care of his niece—the words hit a different way. Because in the moment, all Ash could think was how he *wasn’t* okay and *wouldn’t be* okay and *might not ever be* okay again.

“I-I can’t ask that of you,” he repeated, and he forced his eyes open and looked down at the floor next to him, where the car seat sat. Miracle of miracles, Bri was still sound asleep, her chubby pink cheeks puffing out slightly as she took an extra-long breath.

Things seemed a little steadier already, or at least, that was what he was going to tell himself. He turned his head slowly, letting his body adjust to the tilt and spin. Then he gave Cass the best totally-not-a-grimace smile he could muster.

“I’ll be okay. She’s sleeping for now, and I’ll nap while she does, and I’m sure—I’m sure I’ll be fine. You’ve done so much to help me. Really, I . . . I can’t thank you enough.”

The other man nodded hesitantly, and Ash could tell Cass knew he wasn’t really telling the truth. Still, Cass gave him a soft smile as he stood.

“I’m glad I was able to help,” Cass said.

Something flickered in Cass’s eyes then, and Cass looked away quickly, down to the sleeping infant. He laughed quietly and then knelt next to the car seat.

“She really is beautiful, you know,” he said, and then he glanced back up at Ash and smiled again. “If you need anything at all—anything—please, uh . . .”

Cass stood and turned around, then seemed to straighten up more as he purposefully strode over to the small desk pushed into one corner of the room. Ash watched, his eyes narrowed slightly, as Cass rummaged through the top drawer until he pulled out a pen and pad of paper. Then he scribbled something on the page, ripped the page off the top of the notepad, and turned back around, another careful smile growing on his face.

“My number. Just in case. Call me or text, that’s fine too. And if I can come and bring you something, help you with Bri, anything at all, I will. I’d

be happy to.” Cass offered the paper to Ash, and Ash just stared at him for a moment, unable to look away. Finally, he managed a weak nod and took the paper, lowering his eyes to read Cass’s neat handwriting.

*Caspian Jacobs - 530-555-7576*

“Caspian, huh?”

He looked back up, and Cass was grinning now—that confident smile that seemed to make his eyes twinkle.

“My mom is a huge C. S. Lewis fan,” Cass said, shrugging. “And from what I understand, my dad vetoed Peter and Edmund. So, Caspian it was.”

“I like it.” Ash’s cheeks suddenly felt a little warm, and he dipped his chin. “I mean, it’s unique. I don’t think I’ve ever met a Caspian before.”

Cass didn’t respond, and when Ash ventured to look back up, Cass was biting his lip and staring toward the door, his hands now shoved in his pockets and his smile almost sad. But then he brightened up and nodded as he glanced back at Ash. “I actually haven’t met another Caspian before, either. I did, however, know an Ash. Back in elementary school. And the only reason I remember”—Cass’s grinned—“is because he hated milk.”

Ash’s face scrunched up in confusion. “Milk?”

“Yep. *Chocolate* milk, even. But his mom still packed him a carton of it every day. And every day at lunch, we’d all race for seats at his table, and he’d make up some contest of sorts to see who would get his chocolate milk.”

“That’s—”

“—silly. Yeah. This went on for years, too, although I only won once.”

“Only once?”

“Yeah. And I can’t even remember what the contest was that day.”

Cass laughed lightly and lowered his eyes, then knelt down next to Bri’s car seat, his whole expression softening. He started to reach out, maybe to brush Bri’s hair back or straighten the blanket draped over her, but then seemed to think better of it. He pulled his hand away and stood.

“You’re sure you’ll be okay?” Cass asked. His voice was gentle, but there was a hint of concern to it too.

Ash nodded, even though he felt anything but confident that was true. He shifted a little on the bed and pressed his hands into the mattress, hoping to keep himself grounded so the unnerving tilt and spin of the room didn’t return full force. “I really do appreciate the help. You . . . saved me today. And Bri. Thank you so much.”

There was another flicker—some emotion dancing across Cass's face so quickly, he was sure he must have imagined it. Then there was just Cass's kind, soft smile.

"Glad to do it. Nice to meet you, Ash. Be safe." Cass tipped his head slightly, and Ash managed another weak "thank you" as Cass turned toward the door.

A moment later, after the door clicked shut quietly behind Cass, Ash closed his eyes and collapsed backwards onto the bed, completely exhausted.

And Bri almost immediately let out a quiet whimper and then another and another, each one growing a little louder. A tear slipped down Ash's cheek, and he reached up to wipe it away as he pushed himself to sit. Then he lowered himself down to the floor next to the car seat, settled his hand gently on Bri's chest, and started humming softly, hoping beyond hope that she'd fall back to sleep.

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*Dad (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 11:49 a.m.):* The power just went out. I'm going to call work and say I can't come in today, even if they need me. I won't leave your mom with the weather like this

*Dad (11:50 a.m.):* Also, it started snowing here again. Please drive carefully. Love you

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# Chapter Eight

## Cass

"STAY SAFE AND HAVE a great day, Mr. Pugliano!"

The door slammed in Cass's face, and he sighed before turning away. The snow had started back up, and despite most predictions saying the storm should have been over by now, it was coming down hard. From Mr. Pugliano's porch, Cass could barely see his dad's truck parked along the sidewalk, not more than thirty feet away.

Driving home in this was not going to be fun.

Carefully, he picked his way over the layers of snow and ice covering the walkway and driveway. When he reached the truck, he quickly climbed in and closed the door behind him. The truck's heater blasted hot air at him, and he shut his eyes, let his head drop back against the headrest, and breathed out a deep, long sigh.

He allowed himself only a few seconds. Then, Cass straightened up, fastened his seat belt, and shifted the truck into drive. The snow would accumulate more and more the longer he sat here, and even if he was exhausted from the whole morning so far, he couldn't let anything stop him from getting home. His mom was already stressed enough. And stress wasn't good for her.

It wasn't far to his house, but because of the low visibility, he drove slowly. Somehow, he could sense the unnatural quiet of the neighborhood, the usual clarity and sharpness shrouded by a dense layer of white that seemed to absorb all the sound and color. It was unsettling.

When he pulled up outside his home a few minutes later and put the truck into park, he sat there with his hands on the steering wheel for an extra second or two, letting his jaw relax. Then he glanced over at his cell phone sitting on the passenger seat.

No new messages.

Not that he should expect any.

He especially shouldn't be expecting any from the indescribably handsome and intriguing man he'd helped to get settled at the hotel no less than thirty minutes ago. Hopefully, Ash was resting, his niece sleeping peacefully, his migraine at bay.

Cass closed his eyes as a mess of emotions hit him—a strong pang of worry right at the forefront.

He'd done all he could. Ash and Bri were safely off the road, and Ash had his number if he needed anything. There were a couple of restaurants right nearby, within walking distance if—

Cass groaned loudly and barely resisted the urge to smack the steering wheel with one hand. How the hell was Ash supposed to walk to go get himself food when the ground was covered with snow and ice and he was presumably still recovering from migraine-induced vertigo? He shouldn't be taking his niece out in this weather, either. Cass should have offered to bring him lunch or dinner or *something*.

And did he have enough diapers? Baby formula? . . . Whatever else babies needed? Cass had gotten a glimpse into the diaper bag he'd carried up to the hotel room, but he had no reference for how much of what was needed to care for a baby.

An image of Ash toting Bri through the snow down the street to Walgreens to buy diapers flashed in Cass's mind—Ash's cheeks and hands freezing, his eyes pained, his walk unsteady and slow. If he slipped and fell while carrying the baby, even if she was in her car seat . . .

His stomach lurched, and he shook his head to push away the thought.

Ash would call him if he needed help. That was why he'd left his number.

He didn't need to worry about that right now. No, what he needed to do was to go inside, reassure his mom that he was okay, make sure his dad was still planning to stay home. He needed to check that his dad had been able to get the generator to work so they had heat—his mom couldn't get too cold or her physical symptoms tended to get worse. And he needed to make sure his parents had both eaten lunch and that his dad hadn't had any trouble helping his mom do her physical therapy.

Those were all the things he needed to be doing. Not sitting here worrying about a man who was perfectly capable of taking care of himself and his niece.

With another shake of his head, Cass shut off the truck's engine, hopped out, and trudged through the snow up to the house. He could hear the generator running even before he opened the front door, and the warm air that hit him when he let himself inside was as much a relief as the sight of his parents sitting together on the couch in the front room, his dad reading out loud from one of his mom's favorite novels while his mom sat quietly and listened.

They didn't seem to notice him right away, and something about their closeness made the moment feel so intimate that he almost didn't want to interrupt them.

As silently as possible, he removed his coat, gloves, and beanie and then knelt down to take off his boots. Only after all of his winterwear was off and put away and he'd started into the living room did his father stop reading and his mom lift her eyes to see him. A slightly lopsided smile lit up her face, and she motioned him over with her good hand.

"Caspian, oh thank goodness," she said, her words slow but clear. "I was so worried."

Cass angled around the coffee table to the far side of the couch. "I'm sorry, ma. I wish I could have been back sooner." He took her hand and lowered himself onto the couch next to her.

"I get so worried. The snow and ice." She squeezed his fingers, probably with as much strength as she had, though he felt it only as a slight tightening. He squeezed back gently. "I know you and your father don't mind driving in it. But it terrifies me."

"I know, ma. But I'm home now, and I'm safe."

He watched his mother close her eyes for longer than a blink, her chin dropping. Then she breathed in deeply and looked up at him again, her smile full of love. With another gentle squeeze of her hand, Cass leaned in and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"Did you have lunch yet?" he asked, glancing over at his dad, who was sitting on the other side of his mom, one arm resting along the back of the couch.

His dad shook his head. "Not yet. Your mom wanted to wait for you to get back home."

Cass worked hard to keep his smile from faltering. “Aw, ma, you know you didn’t have to wait for me.”

His mom let go of his hand and patted his leg. “Well, it was either that or suffer through your father’s cooking. I chose to wait.” His mom’s crooked smile brightened with her obvious tease, and Cass pursed his lips to hold back his laughter. His eyes darted to his dad, who was shaking his head.

“I am not going to dignify that with a response,” his father retorted, though his hand moved from the back of the couch to settle on her shoulder, and Cass swore he could see the glistening of tears in his father’s eyes.

Flickers of memories of his mother’s past personality—playful, humorous, endlessly optimistic—danced around in his mind, and for a moment, Cass felt an overwhelming sense of nostalgia, maybe, followed quickly by a sort of empty grief. She used to joke all the time. Tease them, play pranks. Silly, harmless things that made everyone around her laugh and smile and generally be as happy and lighthearted as she was.

But her communication difficulties since her stroke had changed all of that.

Now, there were times she couldn’t quite understand humor. And more often than not, she didn’t seem to have the presence or quickness of mind to tease or make a joke.

So this moment—tiny though it was—hit. Hard.

Her hand still lingered on his leg, and he covered it with his own and swallowed back all of the emotions he was feeling. Then he let himself grin.

“How about I make that chicken salad you love, ma? We still have those croissants from Mrs. Bridges.”

“That sounds perfect, dear,” his mom said, her head tilting slightly to the side as though she no longer had the energy to hold it up straight.

Cass smiled at her and then glanced past her to his dad. “Dad, that okay with you, too? It’ll take me about twenty minutes.”

His dad’s expression softened, and he nodded. “That should be just enough time for us to finish reading the chapter we started. Right, Paula?”

Cass’s mom blinked slowly, and with effort, she turned to her husband. “Yes, I think so.”

With a soft smile, his dad scooted closer on the couch, kissed his mother’s cheek, and then opened up the book and started reading again. Cass watched for only a moment before he stood and made his way into the kitchen to prep lunch.



*Brendan (5:17 p.m.):* Laurie says Westside is staying open tonight since they have power. Serving a full dinner menu, too. It'll be hella busy but we're going anyway, meeting Tam, Trish, Gil, n Matty there at eight. You up for dinner and drinks tonight instead of tomorrow?

*Cass (5:24 p.m.):* I should be able to swing it

*Brendan (5:25 p.m.):* sweet

CASS STUFFED HIS PHONE in his pocket and swiveled around in his chair until he was facing the large window in his bedroom. Outside, the snow was still falling lightly, the flakes now tiny wisps of white rather than big, floaty chips. The lone streetlight positioned on the other side of the street gave the snow an orange tint in the growing darkness of the early evening and accentuated the tire tracks looping down around their end of the cul-de-sac.

The snow accumulation was like nothing he'd seen around here before—at least, not that he could remember. The weather reports were saying just over a foot had fallen since the afternoon before, and if Cass's memory served him right, that was about as much as had fallen in the snowstorm that happened back in December 2013, when Cass was fifteen. He vaguely remembered that storm shuttering the whole town—school had closed, restaurants had shut down, his mom had stayed home from work. Everything had come to a complete halt until the temperatures had warmed up and the city had managed to plow enough of the roads for people to get around.

So he was surprised, in a way, that the town wasn't more shut down by now. From what Brendan had told him earlier, the city had plows out working to clear the roads, but they could only do so much, and without all-wheel drive or chains, it wasn't safe to be driving. The I-5 had been shut down again about an hour ago due to another huge accident involving two semis and a bus.

Cass should probably stay home tonight.

But there'd been a tug in his gut all afternoon—a worrying unease that had grown as the sun's light had faded. It was nonsensical, really. Because he

knew exactly what he was worried about and why he knew he couldn't just sit at home tonight.

He spun his chair back around and looked down at the clock on his desk. Five hours ago, he'd left an exhausted man having a vicious migraine attack in a hotel room alone with his young niece. Cass had been obsessively checking his phone, and . . . nothing.

That should have been good news, really. And yet, Cass couldn't seem to keep himself from worrying—not that something had happened or that Ash and Bri were unsafe, but that Ash hadn't eaten, hadn't gotten to rest, didn't have enough diapers or formula or baby clothes. He worried, too, about the flashes of anxiety and some other deep emotions he'd seen in Ash's eyes. A heavy sadness. Or something.

Sure, he'd left Ash his number, and Ash hadn't called or texted him asking for help. But Cass sort of had a feeling that Ash *wouldn't* ask for help. Even though he'd only known Ash for a very short time, he sensed that Ash would do his best to "tough it out," at least for things related to his own well-being and comfort.

That was why he probably had plenty of stuff for the baby.

But Cass had this awful worry in his gut that Ash possibly hadn't slept or eaten all day and that Ash's migraine may have gotten worse, not better.

A light knock on the half-open bedroom door startled Cass out of his spiraling thoughts, and he blinked and looked up to see his dad standing in the doorway, frowning.

"Hey, thought I'd let you know, your mother is pretty tired today." His dad's frown deepened, and he let out a short sigh. "I think I'm going to get her in bed early."

Cass nodded and pushed his chair back. "That's probably a good idea." He stood and glanced over his shoulder to the window. The snow had stopped falling, but that tug in his gut was still there. "I've got an errand to run, and then I'm heading out to Westside to hang with Brendan and Laurie later. Do you mind if I take the truck?" He turned back to his dad. "It handles much better in the snow than my car."

His dad's expression tightened, and when he didn't answer right away, Cass forced a smile.

"I'll be careful."

"I know you will." His dad shook his head. "Can't the errand wait? The roads are bad."

Cass laughed lightly. “Mom’s worrying is rubbing off on you?” When his dad didn’t answer, Cass swallowed hard and dropped his eyes. Maybe he should just stay in. It was bad out there, after all.

His dad cleared his throat, and when Cass lifted his eyes, he saw his dad frowning. The older man sighed. “Just come and say good night to your mom before you go? And promise me you’ll be careful. I don’t want a call in the middle of the night that you’ve been in an accident or anything. Got it?”

Cass huffed a quiet laugh but nodded solemnly. “Yeah, of course. Thanks, Dad.”

“Don’t thank me. Just bring yourself and my truck home in one piece later.”

“I will.”

“Alright. Come on. Hopefully your mom’s not already asleep.”

With a quick nod, Cass grabbed his wallet from his desk and shoved it into his back pocket. Then he followed his dad down the hallway to his parents’ bedroom so he could say good night to his mom.

He didn’t know exactly what he was going to do when he showed up at the hotel to check on Ash, or even if he’d be welcome, but the buzz of unease that had been swarming around in his chest all afternoon seemed a little less insistent now that he’d made his decision. He only hoped that he’d get there and find he’d been worrying about nothing.

That would be the best outcome.

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*Grant (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 5:29 p.m.):* shit bro that snow storm is all over the news here. looks bad

*Grant (5:31 p.m.):* at least u have extra time to study for finals since ur stuck in a hotel right?

*Grant (5:32 p.m.):* text me back. let me know ur alive and what ur plans are. i'll come over and help unpack when u get home

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# Chapter Nine

## Ash

ASH LET HIS EYES close, reluctantly giving in to the exhaustion that had been clouding his mind since the onset of his migraine earlier. He'd been sleeping in fits, not unlike his niece, but the sleep hadn't been restful or even helpful. His head still felt like it was being split down the middle, and every other thought he had seemed to fizzle out before he could finish it. And if he tried to stand up, the world turned.

Baby Bri slept in her bassinet on the bed not more than a foot away, comfortable now after Ash had managed to change her diaper for what had to be the tenth time that day, play with her for a few minutes, and feed her. The room was silent, except for the occasional sounds of soft suckling coming from the bassinet, and he welcomed it, letting himself drift off again, even if only for a few minutes.

When he woke to quiet gurgling and rustling not long after, an immediate sense of nausea and a deep, empty ache in his stomach replaced the vaguely comfortable sleep he'd found. Bri seemed to have some sort of sixth sense for knowing when he was awake, because she cooed and started making these adorable babbling noises like she was playing with the sounds.

Ash opened his eyes halfway, swallowing back the ick that pushed up his throat, and propped himself up on one elbow to see over the edge of the portable bassinet. Bri turned her head toward him and made a noise that

sounded something like a laugh. Then she started kicking her feet and cooing happily while reaching up to stuff her hand in her mouth.

She was just about as precious as a baby could possibly be, and that both broke Ash's heart and simultaneously hurt so much that for several seconds, he really couldn't move. He just stared at her through his slight-too-fuzzy vision, wishing he'd wake up or something and find out it was all one big, long, awful nightmare.

When he finally regained some semblance of control, he scooted closer to the bassinet and reached his hand in. She brought her hand up, opened her fist, and managed to grab his finger.

He smiled weakly. "You're too cute, sweet baby girl," he murmured. She stopped gurgling long enough to smile up at him while tugging on his finger to bring it to her mouth. "Hungry?"

Squinting, Ash turned enough to look over at the clock on the nightstand. It was off by a few minutes, he remembered, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that it was just after six, meaning they'd been sleeping for almost an hour. Bri had eaten right before they'd napped, so, theoretically, she shouldn't be hungry yet.

However, if he'd learned anything in the last few weeks, it was that "theoretically" didn't really matter when it came to Bri's feeding "schedule." Since they'd finished up all the stored breast milk Ashlynn had saved and switched Bri fully to formula last week, Bri's eating habits and needs had been a bit of a roller coaster. The general advice he'd been given —by her pediatrician and Shaina and Joanna and every bit of advice he'd looked up on the Internet—was to let her eat as much as she wanted as often as she wanted. Unfortunately, that had meant too much guessing sometimes as Ash had tried to figure out what exactly Bri's "I'm hungry" cry was. Sometimes, she was just fussy. And with all the traveling yesterday and today, any attempt at feeding her at regular intervals had been futile anyway.

He *did* know he'd fed her around five, and even in his migraine-induced haze, he also knew he was taking good care of her. But at the same time, the emptiness in his stomach reminded him just how much he'd been neglecting himself.

When was the last time *he'd* eaten?

Bri gurgled something and tugged on his finger, and he forced himself to smile as he started talking nonsense to her.

“Is my finger that interesting? What if we get you your toy instead? Then maybe I can figure something out so I can eat? *If* I can eat. Hmm.” He gently pulled his finger away from Bri, who thankfully stuffed her hand in her mouth in response, and then leaned over until he could reach onto the other side of the bassinet, where he’d set a couple of her toys earlier. “Here we go, baby girl.”

Her eyes shifted from him to the colorful ring-shaped rattle he offered her, and with a gurgle of delight and fingers that were still barely learning how to deliberately grasp things, she reached up and took the toy from him, then promptly shook it before bringing it to her mouth.

He laughed quietly, though he immediately regretted it as pain stabbed through his head. Closing his eyes, he let himself fall back onto the bed. He needed to call Shaina—she’d texted him three times earlier, and all he’d been able to manage was a short text to let her know they were okay and stopped again because of the weather. And he needed to figure out what the hell to do for food for himself.

He should probably figure that out first before calling her.

He slowly pushed himself up to sit, glad when the room stayed relatively level and didn’t sway, and he turned to look over toward the window. The shade was up—Bri seemed to like when he held her at the window and she got to look outside—and through the darkness, he could see faint flutters of snowflakes falling.

His stomach churned.

There was no way he could leave the hotel. Not on foot, carrying Bri. Not in his car. And especially not given that his migraine was still a problem. He couldn’t take any of that risk.

So what the hell could he do?

Maybe the hotel had a vending machine, he thought, though he didn’t remember seeing one on the way up to the room, and a tiny bag of Doritos or a package of Chips Ahoy certainly didn’t constitute a meal.

There were a bunch of local restaurants, many of them in easy walking distance. But again, it would be reckless and a very bad idea for him to try to get there on foot, carrying Bri in her car seat.

They probably delivered. If there was a pizza place or something close by, he could try calling. Or maybe he could order from DoorDash or some other delivery service. He’d never done that, but then, he’d never needed to.

As quickly as the thought came, however, he pushed it away. He couldn't make anyone drive in this weather, even if he did tip well.

The emptiness in his stomach began to ache again, and he frowned and lowered his head to his hands as the ache intensified. Tears stung at his eyes, and he tried to hold them back—something else he'd learned in the last couple of weeks was that crying definitely didn't help if he had a migraine. He blinked several times and took a steadying breath. And then he stood.

He'd check if the hotel had a vending machine. That seemed like the safest way to at least get some calories in him. He'd call the front desk and ask them. Then he'd hope that if they did have a vending machine, they took credit cards, because he didn't have any cash on him at all.

This time, the room did sway, and he stumbled a step sideways before managing to hold himself upright. He stood there for several seconds and then let his eyes drift across the room. The hotel's phone sat on the top of the dresser, underneath the TV. And right next to it was a white piece of paper and a pen.

The man who helped him earlier—Cass, his name was—he'd left Ash his number.

*"My number. Just in case. Call me or text, that's fine too. And if I can come and bring you something, help you with Bri, anything at all, I will. I'd be happy to."*

Another sharp pain ripped through Ash, though it wasn't physical pain, and he wasn't sure exactly what it meant. It felt different from the grief he'd known all too well since his sister had passed away, but it still wasn't comfortable. Ash glanced back over at his niece, who was happily playing with her toy, and he felt it again.

"I'm okay," he said aloud. Bri gurgled but didn't otherwise react. "You're happy, right, baby girl? And that's what matters right now."

He didn't know what he was trying to convince himself of. Cass hadn't implied that Ash couldn't take care of Bri by himself. He'd only offered to help if Ash needed it.

"I shouldn't need it," Ash mumbled. He screwed his eyes shut for several long seconds, and then he took a slow step forward and then another.

He'd call the front desk. Not Cass. He'd ask about a vending machine. And he'd go from there.

It didn’t take him too long to stagger over to the dresser, pick up the phone, and punch the number to call the front desk. A woman answered from the other end, and he asked his question. But the response wasn’t what he’d been hoping for.

The vending machine was out of order. Had been for a few weeks now. A repair person was supposed to be out today, but they’d canceled due to the weather.

With a quick thank you, Ash hung up the phone. And those tears he’d valiantly held back a few minutes ago threatened to fall again. He turned around slowly until he was facing the bed, and he squinted as his vision blurred for half a second.

He couldn’t take care of his niece if he didn’t take care of himself. Shaina had told him that. Joanna had told him that. Henry had told him that. And it normally wasn’t this hard.

Normally, he thought he managed his life pretty damn well. He was responsible at work and at school. He got things done, was always on time. He paid his bills, kept his finances in order, at least as well as he could. He cooked—he loved to cook, in fact—and he kept his tiny apartment neat and clean. He had plans—career plans, life plans.

Everything had changed, yeah. But the last thing he expected was to have trouble with this one, basic thing—taking care of himself.

He turned away from Bri, blinking back the tears, and he let his gaze land on the white paper again.

*Caspian Jacobs - 530-555-7576*

Ash closed his eyes as he tried to rationalize it in his mind—calling up a total stranger to ask for help. It didn’t seem right. He should be able to handle things.

From behind him, Bri’s quiet, happy gurgle and the stilted shake of the rattle suddenly stopped, and Ash tensed as Bri let out a not-so-happy whimper, which quickly turned louder. The sound pierced his ears, sending a jolt of pain right through the middle of his skull. He clenched his jaw, and with a final flicker of shame, picked up the paper with Cass’s number on it and turned back around.

“It’s okay, baby girl,” he murmured. He carefully made his way to the bed and then set the paper down next to his cell phone on the nightstand and leaned over to lift Bri from the bassinet. She whimpered but didn’t cry, and

he closed his eyes as he held her tight and rocked her gently. “Shh, shh, I’m here. I’m here.”

Bri quieted in his arms, looking up at him with her beautiful, curious gray-blue eyes. He took several deep breaths and tried for a smile, but he felt weak and tired, and when he swayed on his feet this time, it wasn’t because of his lingering vertigo.

“I need to get some help, don’t I?” he said softly, and he was about to sit down—finally ready to let himself make the call—when a quiet knock came at the door.

Ash froze for a second, his arms tightening around his niece. “Who is it?”

“It’s Cass. I was here earlier. I helped you with your car when you were stuck at the off-ramp.” There was a pause, and Ash took a tentative step toward the door. “I brought you some food and a few things for the baby.”

Ash swallowed hard and ignored how his heart rate spiked as he took another few steps over to the door. Cradling his niece protectively in one arm, he undid the deadbolt on the hotel’s door and then turned the handle and pulled the door open a few inches.

The man on the other side stood back a bit, looking almost a little sheepish. He gave Ash a gentle smile and lifted the bags he was carrying.

“I hope I’m not bothering you.” Cass shrugged. “I wasn’t sure what you wanted or needed, so I got a little of everything. Sorry if it’s presumptuous. I just, um . . . yeah.”

Ash stood frozen, his foot holding the door open so he had both hands to carry Bri. When he didn’t say anything, Cass bit his lower lip and dropped his chin.

“If you want, I can leave everything right here next to the door, and I’ll go. You don’t have to let me in or anything. I just thought you might need food or something. Here . . .”

Cass stepped forward slowly, starting to lower the bags to set them down right next to the door, and Ash shook his head.

“No, no.” He stepped back, pushing the door open with his foot more. “You can come in. Sorry, I’m just surprised to see you.” He managed what he hoped wasn’t too tight of a smile. “I was actually about to text you. I’m glad you’re here.”

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*Matty (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 6:23 p.m.):* Hey man, u coming tonite to Westside? I’m bringing a friend I think u should meet. His name’s Joe. Cool dude. Smart and fun and a book nerd like u. Just moved here from Reno. U two might get along ;)

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# Chapter Ten

## Cass

“SO DON’T LAUGH, BUT there’s obviously way too much food here because as soon as I got to the diner, I realized I had no idea what you liked or if you had food allergies or were a vegetarian or hated broccoli or anything like that.” Cass stopped rambling when he reached the small desk in the far corner of the hotel room. He set down all four of the bags he’d been carrying as the door clicked shut. Then he pasted a smile on his face, despite the heat in his cheeks, as he turned around.

Ash stood a few feet away, still cradling Bri tightly to his chest. He stared at the bags on the table, his expression reserved and distinctly uncomfortable in some way. Cass couldn’t immediately tell if it was because of a lingering headache from his migraine or because he’d decided he really wasn’t happy Cass had shown up after all.

And it *was* weird, wasn’t it? It was strange that Cass had come, even though Ash hadn’t called or texted or asked for help.

Cass swallowed hard, trying not to second-guess himself, and then motioned to the bags. “So, there’s, um, a burger and fries, everything on the side, and a garden salad with a couple choices of dressing. Also a chicken pasta dish—it’s my mom’s favorite, actually. She gets it every time we go out. I also got some sides of mashed potatoes and broccoli and fruit. They had some freshly baked bread too. I think it’s sourdough. Then I stopped at Walgreens and picked up some bottles of water and other snacks.”

When Ash’s eyebrows arched in what looked like disbelief, Cass reached up and rubbed the back of his neck as his cheeks grew hotter. He knew he’d

gone overboard; in the moment, when he'd been waiting at the host stand near the front of the diner, looking over the menu, he'd decided it would be better to order too much than not enough. That was also why he'd impulse-purchased more than just the food and snacks, too.

He coughed lightly, and with a lopsided smile, he added, "I also got some diapers and baby wipes. Just in case. I didn't know if you had enough."

There was a flash of amusement in Ash's eyes, and he pursed his lips, almost as though holding back a smile. "Is that all?" he asked, his tone cheeky.

Cass's heart tumbled at the tease, his cheeks now on fire. "Um, no, actually," he admitted, somehow managing to hold Ash's gaze.

"No? *Really*?" Ash's eyes darted from Cass to the bags on the desk. "You bought more than that?"

"Well, uh, I might have also gotten a container of baby formula—I think it's the kind I saw in your diaper bag earlier—and then, at the recommendation of the cashier, I stopped at Ross just a block over for a few extra things . . ." Cass grimaced as he realized how over the top he sounded, and he was about to apologize again when Ash let out a weak laugh.

"You really didn't have to do all of that," Ash said quietly, glancing back at Cass. His eyes still looked plenty amused, although Cass could see a hint of pain in them at the same time. Ash stepped closer and shifted Bri to one arm so he could peek into the nearest bag—one of the two from Walgreens. Ash's smile tightened, and he shook his head. "This is . . . a lot."

Ash looked up and seemed to study Cass for several seconds, his shoulders tense. When Cass tried for another nonchalant shrug, Ash shook his head and continued.

"Whoever the cashier was must know babies. Onesies and burp cloths . . ." Ash blinked his eyes closed for a bit longer than was probably necessary, and when he opened them again, he frowned slightly. "Bri's low on clean clothes at this point. Her stomach hasn't been too happy since we left Los Angeles, and she's been spitting up on everything . . ."

There was another flash of that deep, heavy emotion in Ash's voice, and his eyes fell back to the bags as he seemed to valiantly try to force a smile on his face. Cass's heart ached at the obvious struggle Ash was going through, whatever the reason for it was, and even though he had about a billion questions he wanted to ask, he held them all back and just nodded instead.

It wasn't his place to ask, anyway. It wasn't any of his business whether Ash's migraine was still an issue or whether Ash had managed to get enough

rest or what his plans were for how long he was going to stay and wait out the snowstorm. Hell, it really wasn't even his place to *be* here right now. And as he watched Ash shift Bri in his arms, still cradling her protectively, that feeling only intensified. Yeah, he'd come to help, but he'd probably already done too much. Anything more—or any sort of interrogation, asking questions, expecting answers—would be an even greater overstep.

Cass backed up slightly and motioned to the two bags he'd brought that were from the diner. "I made sure they included utensils and napkins and all that with the food, so you should be set," he said. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Is there anything else you need or want before I head out?"

Ash closed his eyes for several long seconds. When he blinked them back open, a single tear slipped out and down his cheek, and he hastily tipped his head to wipe the tear away on his shirt sleeve.

"No, no, I-I think—" Ash shook his head and turned away suddenly, sniffling. Cass then watched silently as Ash walked over to the bed, bouncing Bri on his hip. He stopped on the close side and lifted the infant away from him, pasting a smile on his face as he looked at her. The baby cooed and gurgled, kicking her feet. Ash brought her closer, pressed a light kiss to the baby's forehead, and then carefully lowered her into a gray-and-teal bassinet sitting almost in the middle of the bed. Bri whimpered but didn't cry, and Ash murmured a few quiet words to her before straightening up and brushing more tears off his cheeks.

He tucked his hands under his arms and turned back in Cass's direction. He couldn't quite seem to look directly at Cass, but he said, "I can't tell you how much I appreciate this and everything you did for me this morning."

"I'm glad I was able to help," Cass said quietly.

Ash gave a tiny nod, though he seemed to shrink in on himself a little more. As much as Cass wanted to stay and see what, if anything, he could possibly do to help, he knew he should go.

So he just gave Ash another soft smile and turned to head to the door. Ash followed him, and when he stopped and reached out to the door handle, a strange sinking feeling rolled through his stomach. With a long breath, he twisted around to face Ash. The man's hands were still tucked under his arms, and his expression was tight and closed off. But he faked a smile—Cass hated how he just *knew* it wasn't real—and offered Cass his hand.

"Thank you," Ash said. "Really. I'm not sure what I would have done . . ."

Cass smiled and nodded. Then he let go of the door handle and took Ash’s hand.

It was warm, the handshake firm and almost confident in a way that contradicted Ash’s demeanor. And it sent a flutter of something pleasant and promising up Cass’s arm and into his chest. He held Ash’s gaze for a long second, lingering in whatever the feeling was. Maybe Ash was feeling it too. Maybe the way his smile softened ever so slightly as they shook hands meant something. But Cass couldn’t be sure.

And in any case, it was time for him to leave.

With another small nod, he dropped his hand and tipped his head toward the door. “I should get going,” he said. “Have a good evening, Ash.”

“You too, Cass.”



THE SNOW HAD STOPPED falling, but the roads were just as bad as they had been earlier as Cass made his way across town to Westside Wines & Hops, the small, locally owned wine and beer lounge where he was supposed to meet up with his group of friends. It wasn’t a long drive, but the layers of ice and snow made the trip dicey, even with his dad’s four-wheel-drive truck, and so Cass found himself driving carefully and slowly.

And the fact that he had to focus on driving carefully and slowly was actually a godsend, since it allowed him very little time to become distracted and overthink everything that had happened in the last eight hours or so.

When he finally pulled into the barely plowed parking lot at Westside, he figured he was probably a few minutes late. He still didn’t hurry, though. Instead, he let the truck idle, and he closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

What a day. That was the gist of it.

The snowstorm. The hours out in the cold, helping people get unstuck. The chance meeting with Ash.

Cass closed his hand and opened it, as though that might remind him of how their handshake felt—the warmth in his fingers, the flutter in his chest. It had been such a strange feeling, so new and different, and something inside him ached to feel it again. That seemed beyond silly. It had just been a handshake, after all.

Yet it seemed to want to replay in his mind, over and over, accompanied by Ash’s tentative smile, trying so hard to overcome whatever that pain was

hidden in his eyes. Cass only wished he'd had more time. That also seemed beyond silly.

More time for what?

*To get to know him*, he thought with some pang of longing he'd never really known before.

With a deep sigh, he opened his eyes and reached over to his phone, which sat on the passenger seat. One missed call from Brendan and then five text messages—two from Brendan, one from his dad, and then . . . two from a number he didn't recognize with a 425 area code.

Cass's stomach swooped, and he immediately clicked on the last texts and began to read.

*425-555-6288 (8:04 p.m.):* Hey, it's Ash (the dude who apparently can't drive in snow - I swear I *did* grow up in Seattle, where it does indeed snow, and so, I suppose I have no excuse). Forgive the big block of text, but Bri is actually asleep and I can finally sit down and write this out like I've wanted to since earlier today.

*425-555-6288 (8:06 p.m.):* Thank you. Thank you so, so much. I don't really have any better words to communicate how much it means to me that you took the time out of your day to help me, a complete stranger, first with my car stuck in the snow and then by bringing me food and everything else. Life hasn't been too good to me lately (which you probably figured out), but your kindness made an impossible situation a little more bearable, and honestly, I'm not sure how I would have gotten through without you. The world needs more people like you in it. Thank you again. -Ash

Cass sucked in a sharp breath and closed his eyes. Then he looked back down at his phone and started to type, slowly and with several false starts.

*Cass (8:16 p.m.):* Hey :) Thanks for the message. You're too kind. I'm just helping out where I can, and I'm grateful to have been able to help you get settled and safe. This snowstorm is worse than I can remember ever having here, and the ice makes it even more dangerous to be driving in, much less hauling a trailer. It's a good decision to wait it out and travel again when it's safe.

*Cass (8:17 p.m.):* Glad to hear Bri is sleeping. I hope you are able to get some rest as well :) Let me know if there's anything else I can do to help. -Cass

Without letting himself stop and wait for a response, Cass swiped his screen over to read the messages from Brendan (asking if he was still coming to dinner) and his dad (reminding him to drive carefully, especially as the temperature dropped). He sent a couple of short replies and then zipped up his coat to prepare himself for the cold outside when his phone buzzed with an incoming text message.

And another of those little flutters of expectation settled in his stomach.

He pulled his phone back out, grinning as he saw the number and message.

*425-555-6288 (8:20 p.m.):* Thank you, I will. Good night!

He wasn't entirely sure what Ash's *I will* referred to. Ash would let him know if he needed anything? Or he would get some sleep? Or maybe it meant that he definitely would be waiting for the roads to clear up before trying to drive again? But whatever it was referring to, Cass realized it didn't matter. There was something in the tone of Ash's texts that just *felt* better, and as he reread each of the texts, all of that anxious worry Cass had been stewing over for the last several hours began to dissolve.

Ash *would* be okay. And for whatever reason, that thought made Cass smile.

He took a moment to add Ash's number to his contacts and send a short text back to say good night. Then, after giving himself another few seconds to sit with the lingering contentment that had washed over him, he slipped his phone back in his pocket, climbed out of the truck, and carefully made his way through the icy parking lot to the entrance of Westside to meet up with his friends.

Inside was warm and loud—the small space filled with laughter and cheerful voices—and he let the atmosphere buoy his spirits even more as he quickly scanned the room to find his friends. The group was tucked away at a picnic bench-type table pushed into the back corner, and he grinned as he heard Brendan's voice call out over the ruckus around him.

"Cass, yo! You finally made it!" Brendan hopped up from his seat at the end of the bench and met Cass with a strong clap on the back. "Everyone's here except Trish. She ended up staying home after all."

“I don’t blame her,” Cass said. “It’s pretty bad out there.”

“Totally,” Brendan agreed. “Grab a seat, man. You drinking? Matty and Tam are our designated drivers.”

From the far end of the table, Tam lifted their glass of what Cass figured was probably ginger ale. “I’ve got Trish’s SUV tonight. Plenty of room if you’re in!”

“We’ll see, I’m not sure yet,” Cass said with a grin. “But here, just in case.” He pulled out the keys for his dad’s truck and tossed them across the table. Tam caught the keyring easily and gave Cass a nod before tucking the keys safely in their pocket.

It was sort of a rule they all followed, though Cass couldn’t remember the group ever having a real discussion about it. He just remembered that when he’d moved back home after his mom’s stroke, Brendan had started insisting there was a plan for every time they went out and any amount of alcohol was consumed. Cass had heard brief mentions of something that happened with Laurie’s family, but he’d never pried or asked for a full explanation. It didn’t matter anyway; it was the right thing to do. And now, with this group—his group of friends he’d known for *forever*—it was habit.

Other “greetings” rose up from around the table. Gil teased Cass for being late, which had been a running joke since junior year of high school, and Laurie complimented Cass on his beanie, which was from their shared alma mater. Then, as Cass removed his coat and beanie and set them on top of a heaping pile of other coats on a chair next to the table, Matty motioned him over to the only open seat left, no doubt strategically positioned right next to Matty’s very good-looking friend Joe.

Matty nudged Cass in the side as soon as he sat, then leaned in and whispered, “He’s single, and he’s a good guy.”

Cass gave Matty a look, but Matty just grinned, his eyes teasing, and he reached behind Cass and tapped Joe on the shoulder.

“Joe, hey, this is Cass,” Matty said in introduction. “Remember I told you about him?”

The man sitting next to Cass was nothing short of gorgeous, if Cass had to admit it. His streaked blond hair was carefully mussed up on top of his head in a way that had to be intentional, and his dark-brown eyes smiled as he offered Cass his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Cass. Matty’s told me a lot about you,” Joe said, his voice slightly lilting as though there was a tease in there somewhere.

Cass immediately grinned. “Has he? Let me guess . . . the spelling bee in fourth grade?”

Joe’s smooth laughter had Cass shaking his head. “Actually, no,” Joe said, his eyes dancing with amusement. He picked up his glass and took a sip of beer. “I’d love to hear that story, though.”

Matty cackled from Cass’s other side, and Cass cringed.

“Stick around here long enough, and *someone* will tell you,” Cass quipped, elbowing Matty in the side. Laughter broke out around the table then, and, despite Cass’s pleas and attempts to redirect the conversation, the story got told anyway in some hilarious round-robin fashion. Brendan started, and then Gil jumped in, followed by Tam and Laurie. And by the time the story finished, Cass’s cheeks were on fire, and everyone was laughing.

“I guarantee you he’s never spelled *joust* wrong since,” Matty finished, clapping Cass’s shoulder.

Cass just sighed good-naturedly and shook his head, and after a server came and took his drink order and everyone’s food orders, the conversation jumped to something completely different around him. By the time the server returned a few minutes later with Cass’s Arnold Palmer, Brendan, Laurie, and Gil were in the middle of some back-and-forth about a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign Brendan was DMing, and Tam and Matty were laughing at a video Tam had taken of their new dog jumping around in the snow. Cass glanced at Joe sitting next to him, and he grinned as he saw Joe shaking his head at whatever Brendan had just said.

Cass nudged Joe gently. “Do you play?”

Joe laughed. “D&D? No, never have. You?”

“Nah.” Cass took a sip of his drink, and Joe copied him. “Brendan’s been trying to get me to join their ‘campaign’ or whatever it’s called for months now, but I’m pretty busy, and it seems like a real time-suck, unless, you know, you’re really into it.”

Joe gave a small nod as he set his beer back down on the table. He didn’t say anything else, but he held Cass’s gaze for a few long seconds. Cass tried not to compare how he felt now with how he’d felt earlier at the hotel with Ash, because whatever he’d felt then—that tiny flutter in his chest, the warmth of their handshake, that desire to get to know Ash better—had to have been a figment of his imagination. He probably wouldn’t see Ash again, anyway. Joe, on the other hand, lived here in Redding now. He’d be around. So even if those feelings weren’t there now, maybe if they got to know each other . . .

Cass grinned and lifted his drink slightly. “So, Joe, what brought you to Redding? Work?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m actually starting a teaching position at Shasta College after the new year. Well, and I have family nearby.” Joe’s eyes lit up with pride. “My sister lives up in Shasta Lake. She’s a special ed teacher.”

“Ah, that’s wonderful,” Cass said with a soft smile. “My mom was actually a special ed teacher, too.” Matty gave Cass an elbow to the ribs as if to say *See! I told you so!*, but Cass just kicked Matty’s foot under the table in retaliation and then turned slightly to face Joe. “So, what do you teach?” he asked, and then he listened, sipping from his drink, as Joe laughed lightly and started talking.

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*Shaina (Saturday, December 11, 2021 – 9:24 a.m.):* Just landed at SeaTac. Grant offered to pick me up and take me to your place. PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE drive safe, don't rush, just get yourself and Bri up here in one piece. That's all I ask

*Shaina (9:26 a.m.):* Love you <3

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# Chapter Eleven

## Ash

KNOTS TIGHTENED IN ASH'S stomach as he listened to Bri cooing quietly in her car seat. He dried the bottle he'd just rinsed out with one of the few remaining clean burp cloths he had left, and then he stuffed the bottle into Bri's diaper bag, along with the cloth and a bag of baby wipes. She played with her rattle, making soft, cute noises like she was perfectly content and happy as could be, while he finished packing the rest of his things into his luggage bag.

She'd been a perfect angel so far this morning. But the entire day on Friday and the whole of last night had been filled with sporadic wailing, a constant need to be held, and much less sleep than Ash thought was probably best for a four-month-old infant.

He had no real plan beyond *start driving*. The roads were clear according to every news report he'd managed to find online and every traffic cam he'd viewed on the CalTrans and TripCheck websites, and the temps had been consistently in the mid-forties to mid-fifties in the region and heading north since the storm system had cleared completely by late Friday morning. If he left now and didn't have to stop too often, he'd be through the iffy mountainous parts of Northern California and southern Oregon by early afternoon. He could stop overnight in Eugene or Portland, if he needed to. Or he could keep going.

He desperately hoped he'd be able to keep going.

He wanted to get home. More than anything, he wanted to get home and sleep in his own bed and use his own shower and cook his own food. He

wanted to be some place safe and familiar, where he knew what to expect and how to handle things. And he wanted to see Shaina.

In the most basic sense, he needed one of her hugs.

It wouldn't be exactly what he *really* needed, but it would be the next best thing.

Closing his eyes, he took a slow breath in and let it out to a count of five. Then he pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened up his messaging app to send Shaina a short text.

*Ash (10:46 a.m.):* Leaving now. I'll message you when I stop. Wish me luck ;)

She messaged him back almost immediately with a selfie of her and his friend Grant standing in the kitchen of Ash's tiny one-bedroom apartment. Grant held a broom in one hand and a duster in the other, and Shaina was armed with a bottle of window cleaner, her jet-black hair tied back into a high ponytail.

*Shaina (10:47 a.m.):* Deep clean in progress. Grant and I will have your place spotless by the time you get here. DRIVE SAFE!

Ash sighed, typed out and deleted about five variations of *you don't have to do that*, and then gave up and sent a string of heart emojis followed by "thank you both, you're the best." And with the biggest smile he could muster, hoping it would distract Bri enough that she wouldn't be able to sense the dread in his gut, Ash knelt down in front of the car seat.

"Ready to go, sweet girl?"

Bri smiled up at him and gurgled and then seemed to hold out her rattle as if to hand it to him. His heart ached in his chest.

"How about you keep that for yourself, and we'll get going, huh?" Ash said softly, still smiling.

Bri made some silly babbling noises in response and brought the rattle back to her mouth, and Ash stood, shouldered the diaper bag and his duffle bag, and took one more glance around the room to make sure he had everything. Then he picked up Bri's car seat, lifted the handle of his suitcase, and started toward the door.

Checkout was simple and quick, though Ash avoided looking at the final bill and chose to just fold up the full-page folio and stuff it into his pocket. He

had enough to worry about right now without getting anxious over money matters too.

Outside, the air was crisp but not frigid, and the parking lot had been mostly cleared of snow. Still, he walked carefully. A little more than five minutes later, he was sitting in the driver's seat of his small SUV, his hands grasping the wheel with a bit more strength than needed and his foot pushed down hard into the brake pedal, as he listened to Bri gurgle happily in the back seat.

The vehicle was still in park, and he hadn't even tried to move. Yet his heart pounded, and an odd, not-entirely-comfortable tingle buzzed in his fingers.

"It's fine, right, Bri? The roads are fine. They said on the news this morning," he mumbled, putting as much optimism into his words as he could. Bri didn't answer, of course, and he closed his eyes for a second.

This fear gripping him was entirely new and entirely unwelcome. He *really* hadn't been prone to anxiety at all, not before that call from Shaina weeks ago. But now, he couldn't even seem to convince his hand to let go of the steering wheel long enough to shift the car into drive. His stomach lurched at even the simple thought.

He wished he could just get angry. Punch a wall. Scream up at the sky. Let out everything he was trying so hard to keep bottled in. Because this wasn't fucking fair.

*Life* wasn't fucking fair. Not at all.

But Bri was happy in her car seat for the moment, cooing and gurgling and kicking her little feet under her blanket—he could hear the quiet swish of the bottoms of her onesie rubbing together with each kick.

He couldn't ruin that. Especially not now, when they were about to get driving.

With a short breath, he forced himself to sit up straighter and open his eyes. Then he forced another breath and another. His phone buzzed from where he'd set it on the passenger seat, and he groaned inwardly.

"Yeah, yeah, Shai, I'm going," he grumbled, before he even looked to see who it was. Then he swallowed back every last ounce of dread, let go of the steering wheel, and shifted the car into drive.



HE STOPPED TWO AND a half hours later in Ashland, Oregon, fed and changed Bri, and filled up his gas tank. His hands were mildly cramped from gripping the steering wheel so hard, but the roads *had* been clear and easy to drive on, and Bri had thankfully napped much of the way.

Then he stopped another two hours later in Sutherlin and again after another two hours in Salem. He didn't eat; his stomach was a mess, and he knew he wouldn't be able to keep anything down. By the time he reached South Portland around 9:30 p.m., he was exhausted and starving, and his voice was hoarse from spending the entirety of the last hour singing nursery rhymes to try to keep Bri from wailing.

It hadn't worked.

She was done for the day, and there was no way he was going to make the last two-and-a-half-hour leg of the trip to Seattle tonight.

He managed to push through to the final exit in Oregon, just before crossing over the Columbia River into Washington, and he pulled into the parking lot of a Holiday Inn right on the water. Bri's cries from the back seat sounded awful, and he quickly parked in a double-sized parking space near the hotel's entrance, cut the engine, and hopped out to check on her.

One messy-but-contained diaper change later, Ash hauled himself, Bri, and his luggage plus the diaper bag into the hotel. He realized only when he stepped into line behind three other customers that he should have called ahead to be sure they had rooms. By the time he reached the front of the line, they had only one room left—thankfully one with a king bed, which would accommodate Bri's portable bassinet—and he took it, again not even bothering to worry about the cost.

The room was on the first floor, just down a short hallway, and Ash didn't even take the time to register how small the room was before dropping his stuff next to the bed and heading back out for a short walk across the street to a Taco Bell, carrying a now-sleeping Bri in her car seat. He ordered a couple of chicken soft tacos, hoping that would be enough to placate his empty stomach, and then he trudged back through the cold to the hotel.

Bri stayed asleep the whole time, and after he pushed through the door to their room, Ash carefully set her car seat down next to the bed and, as quietly as he could, collapsed into the armchair in the corner, clutching the fast-food bag and a bottle of water he'd brought in with him from the car.

His stomach ached and growled, but he didn't eat right away. Instead, he set the food and water down on the tiny side table next to him and pulled out his phone. He had no new messages, but he needed to send one.

Shaina was waiting for him, he was sure.

With weak fingers that trembled slightly, he typed a quick text and sent it to her.

*Ash (10:02 p.m.):* We're stopped at a hotel in Portland, a Holiday Inn. Bri is sleeping. I'm exhausted and going to eat and then hopefully sleep. We'll see you in the morning

He set his phone down and pulled out one of the tacos. He'd only managed a single bite when the phone vibrated with a notification. He hurried through another couple of bites, then picked the phone back up.

*Shaina (10:04 p.m.):* You're so close

Ash frowned and closed his eyes for a moment, guilt heavy on his shoulders. He was maybe ninety-five percent sure that hadn't been Shaina's intention—to make him feel guilty about spending the extra two hundred bucks he didn't really have for a hotel room and about making her wait to see Bri again and about keeping Bri from being home, where she would be safe and more comfortable. But those were the thoughts that ran through his head anyway.

From a few feet away, Bri let out a soft sigh in her sleep, and Ash opened his eyes and watched her. Somehow, he didn't cry this time, even as he thought how perfect she was and how much his sister had loved her.

*"Miss you, love you, bye!"*

The familiar words replayed in his mind, and with a deep sigh, he nodded to a question that hadn't been asked. Then he shoved the last bite of his taco in his mouth and picked up his phone.

*Ash (10:07 p.m.):* Just giving you extra time to scrub the toilets =P

*Shaina (10:08 p.m.):* Ew. No. I made Grant do that

*Shaina (10:09 p.m.):* I was just thinking how tired you must be, and Bri too. I'm glad she's sleeping now. I almost want to drive down there to see you tonight. Or make Grant drive me, since I don't have a car here

*Shaina (10:10 p.m.):* And I will if you need me to, say the word

*Ash (10:10 p.m.):* No, no, don't do that. We'll be okay. Just need to sleep. I'm gonna finish eating. ttyl

*Shaina (10:11 p.m.):* Yeah, okay. Love you, see you tomorrow!

*Ash (10:11 p.m.):* Love you too. Good night

Ash started to set his phone back down, but then he paused and swiped back out of Shaina's messages. His eyes drifted down the message threads, and a small smile tugged at his lips as he saw a message from several days ago.

*Cass (Thursday, December 9, 2021 – 8:24 p.m.):* Good night :)

He clicked on Cass's name and reread the few messages they'd exchanged. Then he set the phone back down, closed his eyes, and took a long, deep breath.

Had it been pure dumb luck that had brought Cass to his rescue? And not once, but twice? With a sardonic laugh, which he muffled as best he could to avoid waking Bri, Ash opened his eyes and leaned forward until his elbows were resting on his knees. The answer was a resounding *no*. It couldn't have been luck. Ash was *not* a lucky guy.

If he *was* a lucky guy, he wouldn't be sitting here right now in a tiny hotel room in north Portland, staying as quiet as possible to avoid waking up his niece, who was now his responsibility because his sister—

Ash's insides twisted painfully, and he promptly stood, grabbed the fast-food bag with the second chicken soft taco, and tossed it in the trash. He wasn't really hungry anymore.

From her car seat, Bri gurgled in her sleep, and Ash froze and watched her, letting his mind settle back into the present and remember what was most important. Bri was happy. She was happy and calm and well cared for. And he would always, *always* make sure that was the case.

He'd fumbled so badly, and that was putting it mildly. The whole trip had been worse than messy, and without the kindness of a complete stranger who'd shown up by some miracle and helped Ash out, things would have been much, much worse and much, much more difficult.

But how much he’d screwed up didn’t matter anymore; it was in the past. What mattered now was that going forward, he’d do better. He’d be better. He’d make better decisions. And everything he’d be and do would be to give Bri the best life possible.

She deserved it all.

As soon as he got home, he’d text Cass to thank him again. Then he’d move on, move forward, try to forget all the blunders and missteps he’d taken so he could be the best uncle to Bri. He’d finish his finals, then the school year. After another year, he’d get his undergraduate degree and start his graduate program, and when that was finished and he received his teaching certification, he’d get a job in one of the nicer school districts in the area, and he’d have a good career to support his niece with.

She’d be loved and cared for, always.

He closed his eyes for several long seconds, pushing away all of his grief. Then, quietly, since Bri was still sleeping peacefully in her car seat, Ash grabbed his duffle bag and headed into the bathroom to take a quick shower before hopefully getting some rest.

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*Dad (Sunday, December 12, 2021 – 7:08 a.m.):* I'm leaving for work, your mom is still sleeping. She had a rough night, pain in her hip again. I gave her Tylenol at 2am, so it's safe for her to have more after 8 if she's still hurting

*Dad (7:10 a.m.):* Please let me know how she's doing later. I should be home from work on time tonight

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# Chapter Twelve

## Cass

"ALMOST DONE, MA. JUST one more. Ready?"

Cass waited until his mom gave a small but noticeable nod, and then he helped her reposition her left hand palm up on the table, placed a water bottle on her fingers, and talked her through closing her fingers to grasp the bottle, squeezing as hard as she could for a count of three. She had to use her good hand to keep her fingers lifted and closed around the bottle, and Cass could see the slight frustration in her face as he counted down the hold for her.

"Good, and three more seconds . . . Three, two, one, done."

Her fingers uncurled slowly, and he tried not to react when he saw her flinch.

"Is it cramping up again?" he asked softly.

"It's fine, really," she said, but the way she refused to look at him as she said the words confirmed what he already knew—it wasn't actually fine.

He quietly reached out and removed the water bottle from her hand. Then he set it aside and took her hand in both of his. "Here, ma, this usually helps." Gently, he started rubbing his thumbs in circles on her palm. He could feel the muscles in her hand spasming, and he knew it had to be painful. It was a minute or maybe two before her fingers seemed to relax, and she closed her eyes and let out a shuddering breath.

"Better now?" he asked, stilling his thumbs.

"Yes." Her voice almost sounded slurred, but the right corner of her mouth tightened into a strained smile, and she exhaled slowly and then

opened her eyes to look up at him. “Yes, thank you, dear. I’m sorry . . . I get frustrated sometimes, you know. And today, I’ve been so tired.”

He smiled gently and nodded. “I know, ma.” Looking down at where his hands held hers, he did his best to keep the smile on his face, even as sadness filled his heart. She sounded defeated today, and that always seemed to hurt him more than anything else.

She must have heard his thoughts or seen right through his smile, however, because her hand moved slightly, her thin fingers closing much too weakly around his, and she gave him a squeeze he could barely feel.

He lifted his eyes, still trying to fake his smile, but she shook her head when their eyes met.

“You’re allowed to be sad, Caspian,” she told him, and she blinked slowly, her eyes staying closed much longer than seemed natural. Cass swallowed hard and dropped his chin again as she started talking, her words definitely slurring now. “I know it’s hard, and I . . . I wish . . . I wish I . . .”

He looked back up when she trailed off, but her gaze had shifted to the table, and her head was now tilted too much to the left, like she was having trouble holding it up. “Ma?”

Her eyes blinked closed, but she nodded. “I love you, Caspian. You’re my sunshine,” she said, and she tightened her fingers around his again, just enough that he could feel it. “I should . . . probably go lie down for a bit now.”

“That might be a good idea,” Cass agreed. He slowly let go of her hand and stood. After making sure she was secure and ready, he pushed her in her wheelchair out of the kitchen and back to her bedroom. He spent a few more minutes helping her use the bathroom, wash her face, and take another dose of Tylenol, and then he got her settled in bed and drew the curtains closed to darken the room.

Her eyes had already shut by the time he turned back around, and he stepped over to the bed, knelt down, and brushed a light kiss on her forehead. “Sleep well, ma,” he whispered. She smiled her crooked smile, and not more than a moment later, her breathing relaxed as she fell asleep.

Cass stayed there for another minute or two, watching her rest, and when he was sure she was comfortable and not going to wake up for some time, he quietly pushed himself back up to his feet and left the room, closing the door most of the way behind him.

He paused in the hallway and reached into his pocket to pull out his phone. The screen lit up with the time—2:35 p.m.—and with a silent grimace,

he turned toward his bedroom. It was early afternoon already; somehow, most of Sunday had gotten away from him. Not that he'd really had plans, since he'd known his dad had to go into work, but he'd been busy with his mom and then either cooking or cleaning or doing chores. He'd had some vague notion that he should get a jump on making dinner, but now it was too late for the slow-cooker recipe he'd had in mind. He also needed to email Mr. Peterson at the library to change his volunteer schedule, or, rather, put his volunteer work on hold for now.

He should probably do that first.

Frowning, Cass pushed open the door to his bedroom and then slipped into the chair at his desk and powered up his laptop. He sent a quick email explaining his situation—how his dad's work schedule was going to be unpredictable for some time, even on the weekends, and so, Cass would be unable to commit to coming in, at least until things settled back down. When he was finished, he closed his laptop and leaned back in his chair with a quiet sigh.

He'd been volunteering at the local public library since he came home after graduating from UC Davis, and although the work was mostly on the weekends and only for a few hours at a time, he enjoyed it immensely. He also felt an obligation to continue helping Mr. Peterson, who had been the one to suggest Cass consider an online MLIS program to get his graduate degree so he could become a librarian himself. Mr. Peterson had continued to guide him through choosing a career path and then several school options—San Jose State University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, and University of Washington—and had written a letter of recommendation for him back in November, just before the application deadlines. So the thought of pausing his volunteer work bothered him a lot more than he'd expected it would when he'd spoken with his dad the day before about the changes to his dad's work schedule.

Mr. Peterson would understand; Cass had no doubt about that. That didn't make it any easier, though.

His phone vibrated from his pocket, and Cass shook his head to pull himself out of his negative thoughts and then straightened up to check the notification. When he saw Joe's name pop up on the screen, he grinned and leaned forward to rest his elbows on the desk as he clicked on the message.

*Joe (2:48 p.m.):* Nope. Nuh-uh. Not a chance. No.

Laughing to himself, Cass typed back a response.

*Cass (2:49 p.m.):* Really? Darn. Okay, so no skydiving for Joe. What about . . . Oh! What about rock climbing? You know, without a harness and ropes? What's it called?

*Joe (2:51 p.m.):* Oh geez, you really want to see me die, don't you? Free soloing, it's called. I had a buddy back in college at UNR who went to Tahoe nearly every weekend to go climbing. He loved it but said it's definitely not for the faint of heart. Guess I'm faint of heart. That one's another hard NOPE

*Cass (2:53 p.m.):* Alright. So far we've got no to parachuting, paragliding, anything out on the ocean, and now skydiving and free soloing. Just what *would* you do?

*Joe (2:53 p.m.):* My sense of self-preservation *might* approve zip lining. But really, my feet prefer to stay on the ground

*Cass (2:54 p.m.):* Fair, fair. And in all honesty, zip lining is probably the only one I'd do as well

*Joe (2:54 p.m.):* Good man. Safety first

*Cass (2:55 p.m.):* lol

*Joe (2:55 p.m.):* Okay, ugh, break over. My sister's dragging me back outside to finish painting the fence

*Joe (2:56 p.m.):* But I wanted to ask - are you free Saturday morning? I'm going running out at a trail near the Sacramento River/Keswick Dam. Supposed to be a good spot. About 5 or 6 miles rt, so not too far. Breakfast after, my treat?

Cass stared at the phone for a moment, his smile tightening as the silliness of their banter faded with Joe's sharp pivot. He pursed his lips and leaned back in his chair, lifting his eyes toward the door. Theoretically, his dad was

supposed to be home Saturday mornings; his new schedule had him working a shift Saturday afternoon until late Saturday night, then the early shift Sunday morning. Although it could change at any time.

Biting his lip, Cass glanced back down at the phone just as another message came through.

*Joe (2:58 p.m.):* No pressure, really. I understand

*Joe (2:59 p.m.):* Or if it's that important to you, we can also plan to go bungee jumping

*Joe (2:59 p.m.):* I'll just let you go first and then suddenly have a headache when they're hauling your ass back up. Not a good idea to bungee jump with a headache, you understand

Huffing a laugh, Cass shook his head and started typing.

*Cass (3:00 p.m.):* lol please no bungee jumping

*Cass (3:01 p.m.):* And as long as you don't mind the fact that I run slower than molasses, Saturday sounds good, assuming my dad's schedule doesn't change any more. He works in the afternoon, so I'll need to be back before one to take care of my mom

*Joe (3:02 p.m.):* Easy run day, no problem. I'll pace us at what, a 7 min mile? And one o'clock will be plenty of time :)

*Cass (3:02 p.m.):* I'm going to regret this

*Cass (3:02 p.m.):* I might have run at 10 min a mile the last time I ran a mile, which was probably back in high school =P

*Joe (3:03 p.m.):* No worries, I got you. We'll take it at whatever pace works for you :) My sister is about to take my head off, though. Gotta go. ttyl!

With a grin and another shake of his head, Cass sent a thumbs-up emoji in response. Then he took a breath, pushed himself to his feet, and headed out to the kitchen, his phone still in his hand.

It seemed like he had a date on Saturday morning. Maybe. Or maybe not. He wasn't entirely sure, actually. They hadn't explicitly defined it that way, but from how Joe had asked and how he'd offered to pay for breakfast, that was sure the vibe Cass was getting.

And a date . . . a date should be . . . okay? Or maybe it would be kind of good, even, Cass mused, stopping in the entryway to the kitchen.

He liked Joe enough—the man was good-looking, sure, but also smart, kind, and funny. They'd spent a lot of time talking on Thursday night at Westside, and then there'd been quite a bit of texting back and forth since Friday; it had all been easy and come naturally—no weird, awkward, how-do-we-talk-to-each-other pauses or uncomfortable lulls in the conversation. They didn't seem to have a ton of things in common, but that hadn't really mattered. If anything, it had maybe made things interesting. Or at least Cass could now say he knew more about tapering before running a marathon and what it was like to get seasick on a cruise ship than he'd ever expected to, especially since he himself had never run a marathon or been on a cruise ship.

So as long as the weather held, then Saturday should be . . . good. If nothing else, it would be fun to hang out, and it would also be nice to get outside and take a bit of a break from worrying about his mom and his dad and school and the future and everything that was constantly on his mind.

Like the fact that he had a whole three-and-a-half-pound pot roast he hadn't gotten in the slow cooker this morning. And the fact that he'd never heard back from—

His phone buzzed in his hand again, stopping the thought before it could balloon into something *else* to worry him. With a sigh, Cass stuffed the phone in his pocket and stepped into the kitchen. He needed to get dinner going if they were still eating pot roast tonight—he'd just have to cook it in the Dutch oven rather than the slow cooker. And whoever had just texted him—it was probably Joe again or *maybe* Brendan—he could catch up with them later, when he had more time.

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*Grant (Sunday, December 12, 2021 – 10:28 a.m.):* Hey man, so, we're studying for your child dev final this afternoon. I picked up the study guide that Cramer gave out. I'll help you, and we'll get it done

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# Chapter Thirteen

## *Ash*

ASH HAD A HEADACHE.

Not a migraine—thank god—but it was annoying enough and pervasive enough that it made concentrating on his studying that much harder.

As soon as he'd gotten home a couple of hours ago, much later than he'd anticipated thanks to traffic on I-5, Shaina had hugged him, pointed him to the pizza and two-liter of Dr. Pepper sitting on his kitchen table, and then taken Bri, her diaper bag, and the stroller she'd quickly pulled out of the U-Haul and left with clear instructions that Ash was to eat, study, and rest.

Grant had joined him shortly after, and they'd been cramming for his final exam ever since. Grant wasn't in his class; he was a sociology major and had his own exams to prepare for. But he'd been attending some of Ash's classes to take notes for him the last couple of weeks, and he seemed to have a good grasp on the material—enough to help guide Ash's studying, anyway. Or at least to try to.

But Ash's headache and the fact that he couldn't stop worrying about where Shaina was with Bri were not really helping his concentration much.

"So"—Grant pushed away what had to be his fifth slice of pizza and slid a single sheet of paper back in between the two of them—"I think those are all the topics that the multiple-choice portion will cover. You should be in good shape for that portion of the exam, yeah?" Without waiting for Ash's response, Grant flipped over the one-page study guide and started reading from the top. "'Essay portion—fifty percent of final grade. Be prepared to write a well-structured, five-paragraph essay on one of the following topics.'

Yikes, right. Cramer spent a good amount of time going over this in class. I've got the notes on each one right here."

Ash leaned forward and tried to follow along as Grant turned his computer so Ash could see the typed notes he'd made on each of the three possible essay questions. But even as Grant started talking, explaining his notes and brainstorming ideas that could be included in each of the essays, Ash couldn't focus. His hand drifted over to where his phone sat face down on the table next to his plate, and he tapped the back of the case, nodding along and pretending to listen. Several minutes later, as Grant finished with the second essay question, Ash mumbled something like "mm-hmm, got it" and then picked up his phone.

"Shaina's been gone a long time, don't you think? Bri should be—"

Ash stopped talking as he unlocked his phone and immediately saw a selfie Shaina had sent not more than a half hour ago. She was sitting on a plush dark-blue couch, cradling Bri, who was wrapped up in her purple blanket and sleeping peacefully. The message accompanying the photo read, "We met up with Chris, Jules, and Tori, and we're hanging out here at their place. Bri is happy and sleeping. So stop worrying and study!"

Grant's hand clapped Ash on the back. "Come on, just a little more, and then we can take a break and get some of the U-Haul unloaded."

Ash answered with a nod, but his eyes lingered on the photo for another few seconds, letting the relief of seeing his niece calm his racing heart. He closed his eyes briefly and then nodded again.

"Yeah, sorry." He shook his head and grimaced as he glanced up at Grant.

His friend nodded in understanding and seemed about to say something but then just squeezed Ash's shoulder and let his hand drop away. The sadness in Grant's eyes was a look Ash recognized all too well, and he was reminded, not for the first time that day or week or month, that he wasn't the only one who'd lost someone important when his sister had passed. Grant had known both of them for years; he'd been good friends with Ash since seventh grade and had even dated Ashlynn for a few months when all of them were in high school together. He'd been affected by Ashlynn's death as well.

"Um, yeah, so, what's the last question?" Ash asked, suddenly desperate to have the distraction of studying again. He glanced back at his phone one more time and had just started to set it down when a new notification popped up.

It was another text, but it wasn't from Shaina this time. With a faint smile, he tapped on Cass's name on the screen and read the two messages that came

through.

*Cass (4:44 p.m.):* Great news, thanks for letting me know :) How does it feel to be home? I hope the weather up there is decent enough. Not gonna lie, I've never been to Seattle, and the only impression I have is the stereotypical "it's gray and raining constantly"

*Cass (4:45 p.m.):* Also, not to brag, but it's sunny and 65 here today. Maybe you should have stuck around ;)

"It says, 'How does social and emotional development overlap with linguistic development and cognitive development in children ages five to seven? Provide examples and discuss three ways development could be stimulated in the classroom setting.' That sounds like it could be an entire book, not just a five-paragraph essay, eh?"

"Huh?" Ash looked up from his phone and then blinked as Grant's words registered. "Uh, yeah, yeah, totally not just an essay," he agreed. Grant's eyes narrowed, but Ash shrugged and glanced back down. "One sec, lemme just . . ." He didn't finish his sentence, and instead, he started typing a quick response.

*Ash (4:46 p.m.):* Definitely feels good to be home

He hit send, even though he wasn't really done typing, and then he quickly blacked out the screen as Grant leaned over and elbowed him in the side.

"Ooh, Cass. Who's Cass? Anyone I know?" Grant asked, a clear tease to his tone.

And even though there wasn't anything to be embarrassed about, Ash felt his cheeks heat up at the insinuation. "No one, it's not like that," he said quickly, stuffing his phone in his pocket. "He's just that guy who helped me out in Redding."

"Ahhh. I see. *Just that guy*, huh?"

Ash rolled his eyes. "I still regret telling you, you know."

Grant laughed. "Oh, come on now, that was, what, five years ago? I mean, is it still true? We haven't talked about it since. And I've never told a soul."

"It *was* five years ago. On my fifteenth birthday."

"And?"

“And, what?” Ash arched his eyebrows but dropped his gaze down to the study guide in front of him, like it was suddenly super interesting.

“And is it still true?” Grant asked.

Ash narrowed his eyes and looked back up at his friend. “Am I still gay?”

Grant shrugged, looking sheepish. “Well, I mean, what I remember you saying was you ‘thought’ you—”

“I am,” Ash cut in, and he sighed heavily and ran a hand through his hair. “I am gay. Not that I’ve—” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. And Cass, he’s just a guy who helped me out when my car got stuck in the snow. I texted him earlier to let him know Bri and I made it back safely, and he responded. That’s all.”

He knew his tone sounded defensive, and he couldn’t immediately pinpoint why; Grant hadn’t said or done anything to deserve it, and while he’d kept his secret to himself all of these years, he wasn’t ashamed of who he was or anything like that.

He let out a short breath and shook his head again. “Sorry, I’m just—”

A sudden ache pulsed in his chest, and he lowered his head into his hands as all the air left his lungs.

Dammit.

*Ashlynn.*

That was why.

She hadn’t known. He’d never told her. He’d never told her, and now he never *could* tell her. And something about that hurt much, much more than he’d expected it to.

He clenched his jaw and shook his head, forcing an unsteady breath and then another. *Not now*, he told himself. He couldn’t do this right now—he couldn’t let himself get lost in what ifs and a future that couldn’t happen. He couldn’t let himself get upset and sad and cry. He couldn’t grieve. He didn’t have time for it.

Soon, Shaina would be back with Bri, and he’d have to be “Uncle Ash” again. He’d have to pretend and smile and be strong. And he had to keep studying, keep working hard. He had finals tomorrow and later in the week, and he couldn’t afford to fail—Bri was depending on him.

Grant’s hand settled on his shoulder again. “Sorry if I said something wrong. I shouldn’t have teased about Cass. I, uh, well . . . Yeah, I’m sorry.”

Ash immediately shook his head. “No, no, it’s nothing you said. I’m just tired. Like, really, really tired. Maybe we can just finish here and then unload the U-Haul. I have to return it tomorrow morning before class.”

“Yeah, of course.” Grant nodded and pulled his hand back. “So, this third essay question . . .”

Clearing his throat, Ash pushed away all other thoughts—something he’d been getting much too good at lately—and tabbed to the open Google Docs window on his computer rather than reading from Grant’s screen. “It doesn’t seem too hard. Didn’t Cramer talk about the overlap between the types of development in one of the lectures I missed? Your notes . . . yeah, the one here, from the beginning of last week, right?”

“Yeah, that’s it. ‘Domains of child development and how they support each other,’” Grant said, reading the header from the document on Ash’s screen.

Ash quickly scanned the notes on the page and then bit his lower lip, thinking. “So, for the introductory paragraph for this essay, I’d probably start with . . .”

With Grant’s help, Ash quickly outlined the approach he’d take for the possible essay question, and when they were finished, they left all of the study materials, both laptops, and the mostly empty pizza box on the table and headed outside to start unloading the U-Haul.

All the while, Ash managed to keep his emotions in check. He didn’t even let himself feel a thing when they finished unloading the baby stuff and moved on to Ashlynn’s belongings—boxes of books and journals, all of her finished and unfinished paintings, and stacks and stacks of sketchbooks filled with everything from simple doodles to fully realized drawings. There were clothes too—everything Shaina hadn’t wanted to keep and Ash couldn’t stand to throw out—and cookware and art supplies. Stuffed animals. Two laptops and an expensive-looking digital camera. And photo albums.

Ashlynn had been the one to keep their parents’ photo albums.

Now, they belonged to Ash. Everything belonged to Ash.

He didn’t really have room for all of it, either, not in his tiny one-bedroom apartment.

They set up the crib in the corner of Ash’s room, along with the changing table, and Shaina showed up just as they finished organizing Ash’s closet to make room for as much of Ashlynn’s stuff as possible. Baby Bri was fussy, but as soon as Ash took her from Shaina, she quieted. Her eyes closed gently in sleep not more than a couple of minutes later.

“She’s happy,” Shaina whispered, looping her arm around Ash’s waist.

Ash only managed a half smile. His heart ached too much. He rocked Bri softly and continued holding her close as he looked up at his friends. “Thank

you both," he said, keeping his voice low. He swallowed hard and blinked back tears. "I should maybe go see if I can put her down."

Shaina squeezed him lightly and then stepped away. "And you should try to sleep too."

He almost laughed. "I don't think I've really slept in almost a month now," he admitted.

Shaina nodded. "I know, hon."

Grant stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels a bit. "I've got class tomorrow, and I actually do need to study a bit, so I'm gonna head out. You both good? Need anything else before I go?"

Ash shook his head, and Shaina stepped away from him and gave Grant a brief hug.

"Thank you for helping out," she said.

"Of course. Anytime." Grant tipped his head toward Ash. "Good luck tomorrow morning."

"You, too."

Moments later, Ash closed his bedroom door behind him, dimmed the light, and—miracle of miracles—settled the baby in the crib without waking her. Then, as quietly as he could, he slipped off his shoes and shirt and pants, crawled into bed, and burrowed under the covers.

He'd barely closed his eyes when a single, brief buzz cut through the silence of the room. With a quiet groan, he scooted to the edge of the bed and reached down to dig through the pockets of his jeans. His phone buzzed again just as he pulled it out.

Two text messages—both from Cass. He knew he should probably ignore them for now. Get some sleep, reply later. But he found himself tapping on Cass's name anyway.

*Cass (7:40 p.m.):* Glad to hear it

*Cass (7:40 p.m.):* Have a good night :)

Ash wasn't sure why, but he could almost *hear* a sort of resignation in the simple words of Cass's texts, and that bothered him. He scrolled back up and read Cass's previous messages and then his own short, inadequate response, and he frowned. Given the unwavering kindness the man had shown him, Ash should have at least taken a few more seconds to fully respond to Cass's texts.

He glanced over at the crib, and through the dim light, he could just barely see his niece, her chubby cheeks plumping as she suckled in her sleep. Satisfied that *maybe* he wouldn't wake her, he settled back on the bed on his side and typed a longer response to Cass's earlier messages.

*Ash (7:42 p.m.):* Sorry for earlier! I was studying for a final exam I have tomorrow morning. What I meant to say was that contrary to the (very real and usually true) stereotype, the weather here in Seattle was sunny today. Cold, but not overcast or raining

*Ash (7:44 p.m.):* tbh, I would be quite happy with your 65 degrees, but 35 and sunny was also not bad

*Ash (7:45 p.m.):* Infinitely better than 20 and snowing so hard I can't see the road =P

He paused and waited. Thankfully, he didn't have to wait too long, and he shifted onto his back as he read Cass's incoming messages.

*Cass (7:46 p.m.):* Oh, finals. Ack. What's your major?

*Cass (7:47 p.m.):* That snowstorm was something else. We don't usually get that here, as you can maybe imagine

*Ash (7:47 p.m.):* Educational studies. I plan to teach elementary school :)

*Ash (7:48 p.m.):* You could have fooled me. Looked to me like you knew exactly what you were doing, towing me out of that ditch

Cass responded with a thumbs-up react to Ash's text about his major, and after a couple more minutes, another text came through.

*Cass (7:50 p.m.):* You can blame that on my dad. When he was teaching me to drive, he insisted I learn to be comfortable driving in the snow as well. He used to take me up to a ski resort near Mt. Shasta in the winter when it would snow or out toward Tahoe sometimes. Taught me a bunch of things - how to chain up, how to hook up a tow rope, how to handle hills

*Cass (7:51 p.m.):* When it does snow in town (which doesn't happen that often), a few of us help out if we can

There it was—that kindness Ash had seen and felt from Cass. The man was selfless and caring, and it had nothing to do with anything other than that he was a good person.

He hesitated for half a second and then typed a response back.

*Ash (7:53 p.m.):* I should know how to drive in the snow. I grew up here in Seattle. It does snow here (along with the aforementioned rain, and then more rain)

*Ash (7:53 p.m.):* But I've never really been super comfortable with it. I tend to take the bus when the weather's bad - let someone else deal with it ;)

*Cass (7:54 p.m.):* Fair enough :)

*Cass (7:55 p.m.):* Do you go to UW?

*Ash (7:55 p.m.):* Yeah. I'm halfway through my third year now

*Cass (7:55 p.m.):* Do you like it?

*Cass (7:56 p.m.):* Sorry for being nosy, but I applied there for the online MLIS program. Hoping to hear about admission next month. It's my top choice

*Ash (7:57 p.m.):* MLIS? That's library science, yeah?

*Cass (7:57 p.m.):* Yeah

*Ash (7:57 p.m.):* Sweet

*Ash (7:58 p.m.):* Yeah, I love it here. The campus is beautiful, and the program I'm in is fantastic. All of my professors have been great

*Ash (7:59 p.m.):* I have no idea what an online program would be like, but that's cool that you'd have that kind of flexibility

From over in the crib, Bri shifted in her sleep and then let out the tiniest whimper. Ash's stomach dropped, and he hit the power button to black out his phone, then sat up quietly and peered through the slats in the crib. She was still sleeping, her arms relaxed and her breathing soft and steady. His phone buzzed, but he ignored it this time, pushed the blanket off of himself, and climbed out of bed, careful to be as silent as possible.

He moved to the crib and then stood there for what had to be several minutes, barely breathing as he watched her sleep. And just as it had earlier when he'd been studying with Grant, his heart twisted with worry.

Shaina was here to babysit for him while he took his finals, and then he'd have time off from school to get Bri settled and in a routine. After that, though, when the next quarter started up in January, he'd have a whole new set of challenges to figure out.

Like how he'd possibly *ever* feel comfortable enough letting a total stranger take care of her. And how he'd afford it.

He'd been getting by with his grants and student loans, a strict budget, and full-time work over the summer, along with occasional help from Henry and Joanna. But there was no room anywhere in his budget for childcare costs. Not even close.

He almost wished his program had that kind of flexibility Cass's would have—an online option for at least some of his classes—but that was unrealistic given his major and his career goals. Many of his classes involved participation in group projects and discussions that had to take place in person. And anyway, that was how he personally learned best. He'd been

quite relieved when all of his professors had been understanding about him missing class the last few weeks, given his situation. But that didn't mean he could rely on being able to miss class going forward.

He'd have to figure *something* out.

His phone buzzed again, and this time, Bri did react. She yawned and stretched and opened her eyes partway, and when she saw him, she gurgled and smiled and kicked her feet.

*I should have been sleeping.* That was his first thought. Well, after the rush of love that always hit him whenever he looked at her.

"Hey, sweet girl. Sorry to wake you. Go back to sleep, okay?" he said softly, and he reached down and set his hand on her chest, like Shaina had shown him that very first night back in Los Angeles. He started humming quietly, some weird mishmash version of "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" that always somehow morphed into "You Are My Sunshine," since Ash simply *could not* carry a tune. It worked anyway, thank goodness, and after only a couple of verses, her little eyes blinked slowly closed as she relaxed back into sleep.

He kept humming for a few more minutes, and when he was sure she was really out again, he carefully pulled his hand away and climbed back into bed. His phone sat face down on his pillow, and he picked it up, not surprised to see missed messages from his conversation with Cass.

*Cass (8:00 p.m.):* Good to hear you've had a great experience there! I'm really hoping I get accepted. The program looks perfect for what I need

*Cass (8:05 p.m.):* An online program is the only way I'll be able to continue my education right now, actually. My mom had a stroke earlier this year, and I have to be home to help my dad take care of her

Ash read the last message twice, his heart hurting with a pain that was all too familiar now.

*Ash (8:11 p.m.):* That's rough, I'm so sorry. It's great that you can be there for her and your dad, though

*Ash (8:12 p.m.):* I hope you get accepted to the program at UW. When would you start?

No response came right away, and Ash was just tired enough that he set his phone down next to himself and closed his eyes. If it buzzed again, he didn't hear it before he finally let himself drift off to sleep.

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*Ash (Monday, December 13, 2021 – 2:11 a.m.):* Ah, sorry, I fell asleep

*Ash (2:13 a.m.):* Waiting for the acceptance letter has got to be the hardest part! I'll keep my fingers crossed for you :)

*Ash (2:14 a.m.):* I'll be in the same boat as you this time next year, since I'll be applying to grad school for my MIT. Assuming I get through finals this week, that is

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# Chapter Fourteen

## Cass

CASS REGRETTED SAYING YES to Joe's Saturday morning trail run the moment his alarm went off at six. It had been a long, trying week with his dad pulling overtime at the power plant nearly every day and his mom struggling with persistent hip pain and worse-than-normal fatigue. He'd almost texted Joe to cancel, but then his dad of all people had convinced him not to—said it would be good for him to get out of the house and spend some time with a friend. His mom had agreed.

So, in the dark of the chilly winter morning, Cass dragged himself out of bed, took a short but hot shower to help himself wake up, and then got dressed in a pair of dark-gray joggers and a long-sleeve, dusk-blue tech shirt. He spent much too much time digging through his closet to find an old pair of running shoes, which he had to dust off, and then grabbed his beanie, wallet, phone, and keys and headed out the door at just after six thirty.

Joe lived in a small apartment complex north of town, and since his place was much closer to the trailhead than Cass's, they'd agreed to meet at Joe's and then drive over the rest of the way together. It had seemed like a good plan at the time, but when Joe climbed into Cass's car not more than ten minutes later, sporting an enthusiastic smile that suggested he'd been up for hours already, Cass knew there was no way he'd be able to match Joe's energy.

"So, I haven't run on this trail yet," Joe started as he fastened his seat belt, "but it's supposed to be pretty good—wide and flat so we can run next to each other, and—" Joe stopped himself with what sounded like a nervous

laugh. “Oh, boy, don’t take this the wrong way, but you look like you’d rather be *anywhere* else right now.”

Cass’s cheeks flushed with heat, and he grimaced and shook his head, shifting his car into drive. “Sorry, that’s very much not the case, I promise.”

He risked a glance over at Joe as he pulled away from the curb. The man’s brown eyes sparkled with both amusement and an eagerness that Cass had to admit was almost a bit infectious.

“If you’re still worried about the pace, I really was joking the other day,” Joe said. “I don’t mind at all if we walk most of the way or just jog slowly or even turn back without finishing the whole loop. I know you’re not a runner, and really, I mean, this was just an easy way for me to get to spend more time with you.”

The heat returned to Cass’s cheeks, and he huffed a quiet laugh of disbelief. “You’re too sweet, you know,” he said, pausing at the stop sign at the end of Joe’s street before continuing right and heading northwest on Lake Boulevard in the general direction of the river.

“Too sweet? Because I want to spend time with you?” Joe sounded genuinely confused.

Cass shook his head. “Well, uh, I mean—” He sighed, frowning. “Sorry. Um, the last man I went out with spent our entire date complaining about the food and talking about himself, and I’m pretty sure if we *had* gone running together, he’d have been annoyed with me if I hadn’t been able to keep up. So I guess I, um, appreciate . . . that you’re not like that?”

Cass grimaced at the awkwardness of his own words and the ugly truth that was his dating history, immediately wishing he could take back everything he’d just said. But Joe quickly jumped in to reassure him.

“Oh, yikes, no, I understand,” Joe said. “I mean, if you asked me to go to an art museum with you, I know you wouldn’t expect me to know as much as you do about who the artists were or the types of techniques they used or, uh, whatever it is art history majors know.” Joe laughed again, and it was looser and more relaxed this time. Cass glanced back over at him and was happy to see that Joe’s eager smile had returned. “I like that we have different interests,” Joe continued, shrugging, “and *I* appreciate that you’re willing to indulge me with this. You know, save me the trouble of having to plan a real, romantic date.”

Cass snorted a laugh and focused back on the road ahead of him. “Why do I have the feeling this *is* your idea of a ‘real, romantic date’?”

“I’m offended,” Joe said with mock indignation. “If it were a ‘real, romantic date,’ you’d know.”

“Would I?”

“Totally. I’d have brought flowers, for one.”

“Flowers?” Cass arched his eyebrows.

“Yep, flowers. And energy gels.”

Cass laughed again. “Of course. No romance can be had without energy gels.”

“See, you get me,” Joe said, snickering.

Cass rolled his eyes playfully and then took his foot off the gas. “I turn here? Quartz Hill Road?”

“Yeah,” Joe confirmed. “Left here, and then it’s about a mile, I think.”

Following Joe’s instructions, Cass turned, and they continued on along the quiet, windy road until they reached the trailhead a couple of minutes later. The small, unpaved parking lot was completely empty, and by the time Cass parked and killed the engine, sunlight was barely starting to peek up above the horizon to the east.

They sat there for a few minutes, Joe once again taking the time to reassure Cass that he had no expectations regarding how fast or how far they ran and that he was perfectly happy with whatever pace Cass felt comfortable. Then they climbed out of the car and started off.

The single-track trail was actually not wide enough for them to run next to each other like Joe had expected, but despite all the snow from the week before, it was quite well-maintained and surprisingly not too muddy. Joe insisted Cass take the lead so he could set the pace, though he also joked that being in the back would give him the better view, to which Cass just rolled his eyes.

The run itself was surprisingly not awful. Once they got going, Cass hit his stride, holding them at a steady pace Joe said was about eight minutes a mile—which he could apparently estimate without using any kind of distance tracker or even a watch. They kept up that pace for almost three miles before Cass needed a break. Then, once he caught his breath, they walked the rest of the loop, chatting about anything and everything. It was easy conversation, and by the time they got back to Cass’s car, he was glad he hadn’t canceled.

They drove into town for breakfast at a bistro right on the bank of the Sacramento River near Turtle Bay. Neither of them had been there before, but Joe had picked it for the location and vibe, both of which were on point. The food wasn’t anything to write home about, but the coffee had just the right

kick, and once they finished eating, they each got another cup to go and took a short walk over the Sundial Bridge and back.

It was nearly eleven by the time Cass dropped Joe off at his apartment, and even though Cass had enjoyed every minute they were together, he found himself oddly relieved when Joe didn't seem to expect anything of him—not a hug or a kiss, not to come up to his apartment for something more than that, not even a promise for another date. Joe simply gave Cass one of his kind, enthusiastic smiles, said that he had a great time, and asked if he could text Cass later.

Cass nodded a yes, and Joe's eyes lit up as he grinned. With another smile, Joe thanked Cass again, held Cass's gaze for a long moment, and then got out of the car. They waved goodbye, and Joe jogged up the steps to his apartment before disappearing inside.

Almost immediately, Cass's phone buzzed with an incoming text. He laughed and shook his head as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. Then he tapped on Joe's name on the notification.

> *Joe (10:57 a.m.):* In case it wasn't clear, I'd like to take you out again sometime, if you're up for it. Flowers and a "real, romantic date" this time, minus the energy gels ;)

Cass stared at the message for a second, letting himself sit with the mix of unfamiliar emotions swirling around in his chest as he decided how to answer.

Joe was almost too perfect—he was a kind, sweet man who seemed like he didn't have a mean or conceited bone in his body. He listened, asked questions, acted like he really, honestly cared and wanted to get to know Cass. And the "date" they'd just had, as unconventional as it had been for a first date, was probably the best one Cass had ever been on.

Maybe that was part of his reluctance. He hadn't had much experience with dating or relationships, and every experience he'd had, he had absolutely no desire to repeat.

The one date he'd had with Miles had been awful. The man was very good-looking and successful but had been so full of himself that he'd made Cass feel less-than almost right away. The two hours he'd spent with the man had been torture. And before that, when Cass had still been trying to figure himself out the first couple of years he'd been at UC Davis, he'd dated a few other men, all a year or two older than him and all that same "type" as Miles.

Not intentionally, of course; it seemed that was just the kind of guy Cass attracted—handsome on the outside but ugly on the inside.

Joe wasn't like that. Not at all. That had been obvious right away.

Cass also had more maturity and awareness now, especially after Miles, and he had no trouble saying no and standing up for himself.

It seemed he *did* have trouble, however, accepting when a man really was what he seemed—a good, decent guy who just wanted a chance to get to know Cass.

He bit the inside of his cheek, stopped stalling, and sent a short text back to Joe.

*Cass (11:01 a.m.):* I'd really like that :)

*Joe (11:01 a.m.):* Ahh, wonderful. How does Wednesday night sound?

*Cass (11:02 a.m.):* lol not wasting any time, are you?

*Joe (11:02 a.m.):* ;)

*Joe (11:02 a.m.):* Is that a yes?

Cass pursed his lips and stared at his phone. It should be a yes. He wanted to just say yes and not feel any reluctance. He *should* say yes, without any reluctance. He'd just mentally reviewed all the reasons Joe was a safe person, a good person, someone he *should* date.

So, why was he still hesitating?

He let out a sharp breath and then texted back.

*Cass (11:04 a.m.):* Yes, assuming my dad will be home from work on time :) I'll let you know after I talk to him

*Joe (11:04 a.m.):* Great :) Drive safe, ttyl

*Cass (11:04 a.m.):* Thanks

With one more long breath, Cass set his phone down, shifted his car into drive, and turned around to head home before his dad had to leave for work.



“HERE WE GO, MA.” Cass carefully draped a soft towel around his mom’s thin body to keep her warm and started drying her with another. “You’re sure about Christmas, then? And Dad agrees? We’re going to Uncle Dan’s?”

His mom nodded weakly and lifted her good hand to pull the towel up around her shoulder a little tighter. “I want to see everyone, and this is the easiest way,” she said, her words slow but clear.

Cass tried not to frown at his unease. His uncle lived in Stockton, which was at least three hours away. Right now, even a short drive across town to take his mom to her doctor’s office turned into an almost all-day event and left her exhausted the next day.

“It would be great to see everyone,” he agreed. “But maybe, instead, we could have everyone over here. That would be fun, eh?”

“Caspian . . .”

“Nah, ma, think about it, right? I could cook a turkey and potatoes and green beans, and dad could make pies, just like we did that one time at Thanksgiving when everyone traveled up here. Or a ham. I’ve never cooked one before, but it can’t be that hard, right? I know it’s short notice, but I’m sure everyone would come.”

“Caspian . . .”

He looked up from where he was kneeling in front of her, using the towel to gently dry her legs. Her eyes were tired, but he saw an understanding in them. He smiled softly. “If we have everyone over here, then you wouldn’t have to travel, ma,” he argued quietly. “Dad can add the expander to the table and pull those plastic chairs we have out of the garage. And I can find those little reindeer ornaments for the tree. I’ll help you fill them with Hershey’s Kisses, like Grandma used to do for me when I was a kid. Cody and Jess will have fun with that.”

At the mention of her brother Dan’s grandchildren, she seemed to try for a small smile. “Yes, you’re right,” she said. “They would love that.”

He didn’t say anything more, and she stayed quiet as well while he finished toweling her hair dry. Then he slowly helped her out of the shower and dressed her in her pajamas. When he settled her onto her bed a few minutes later and knelt in front of her, the exhaustion in her eyes had morphed into sadness.

He pursed his lips and took her hands in his, his heart aching. “I just want what’s best for you,” he said. He tried for a smile, but he knew it looked strained, at best. He continued, working to steady his voice. “Going to Uncle Dan’s, that’s a long drive. I think we’d have to get a hotel for the night, and . . .”

He trailed off, unsure of whether or how to keep trying to convince her. And if his dad had already okayed it, maybe Cass was being overly anxious anyway. He dropped his chin and was about to apologize when his mom squeezed his hand weakly.

“Don’t you worry, dear,” she said. She took a slow breath. “You worry too much, you know? About me. About your dad. About everything.”

Cass huffed a small laugh and nodded. “Yeah, I know, ma.”

“What I want to know most,” she continued, her words starting to slur together now, “is how did your date go this morning. You never told me. His name’s Jon, right?”

“Joe. His name’s Joe. He’s a friend of Matty’s. Just moved here from Reno.”

“Oh, that’s right. You said . . . you said he’ll be teaching at the college?”

“That’s right, ma.” Cass squeezed her hand and then carefully helped her lie down as he told her all about Joe and his date. When he finished, she was tucked safely under the covers, her eyes half closed and her breathing already starting to slow. She shook her head slightly, though, as if rejecting something he’d said, and she pulled her good hand out from under the comforter and reached over to set it on his thigh.

“He sounds like a sweetheart, Caspian.”

“He really is,” Cass agreed.

“So, why are you sad, dear?”

The question surprised him, but he didn’t get a chance to answer; his mom’s eyes closed, and her breathing changed to the deep rhythm of sleep. He stayed there for several more minutes, and when he was sure she was comfortable, he stood quietly, turned off the bathroom light, and made his way out of the bedroom, leaving the door cracked open a few inches, as always.

Then he stopped in the hallway and stood there, replaying her question over and over.

Sad? Did he seem sad? *Was* he sad? What would make her think that?

He stuffed his hand in his pocket and pulled his phone out, almost on autopilot as he opened his text messages and then clicked on a message chain

from much earlier in the day.

*Ash (1:34 p.m.):* I passed! Yo! Haha. I know you were sitting on the edge of your seat waiting to find out

*Cass (1:59 p.m.):* Ahh, sweet! Congrats! :) Which classes again?

*Ash (2:02 p.m.):* Child Development and Learning was Monday, and then the two I took on Wednesday and Thursday were Current Issues in Education and a neuroscience class

*Ash (2:03 p.m.):* My other final was a project that I finished while I was still down in LA

*Cass (2:06 p.m.):* Awesome, so, you're all done? Winter break time? Any plans?

*Cass (2:07 p.m.):* Not going skiing, are you? ;)

*Ash (2:08 p.m.):* God, no. I'll be staying as far away from the snow as possible

*Cass (2:08 p.m.):* Probably for the best

*Ash (2:09 p.m.):* =P

He shuffled forward a few steps and reread the text message chain for probably the fifth time as a smile grew on his lips and some warm sense of pride filled his chest. It was only when he reached the kitchen island that he realized what he'd done.

*"So, why are you sad, dear?"*

He'd taken his phone out just now, fully intending on scrolling back through his messages from Joe to remind him how *not sad* he should be. He could even remember Joe's last messages from only a couple of hours ago—some silly, timely memes about running that had Cass cracking up. But instead, he'd automatically clicked on Ash's name, not Joe's.

And he’d felt some immediate, intense shift to something lighter. Something happier and hopeful and . . .

He shook his head, not wanting to let himself go there, and for the umpteenth time, he reminded himself that Joe was here while Ash was hundreds of miles away in Seattle. Joe was kind, smart, funny, sweet. They got along well. He was easy to talk to. He listened and cared. And he’d asked Cass out. Twice now.

It was still early on in whatever this relationship of theirs was, but he already knew it was a good thing they had going.

He *should* be happy about it. So, why—

With another shake of his head, he stopped that thought in its tracks. He *was* happy about it. He *was*, and he *would continue to be*. And that was the truth.

Slipping his phone back into his pocket, he stepped forward to the sink to get started on the dishes from dinner. And he did his absolute best to try to keep his mind firmly here, at home, in Redding, even though all it really wanted to do was wander off somewhere hundreds of miles to the north.

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*Henry (Monday, December 20, 2021 – 10:45 a.m.):* Our plane gets in Thursday at 3pm. Looking forward to seeing you. How are things going? Shaina's been keeping us updated, but I know how overwhelming being a new parent can be. I'm always free to chat if you need it.

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# Chapter Fifteen

## Ash

ASH CLOSED HIS EYES and leaned back against the couch cushions, cradling a very fussy, slightly feverish baby Bri in his arms. It was day two of whatever this virus she had was, which meant day two of little to no sleep for him, and even though her new pediatrician had assured Ash it was completely normal for babies to get sick and that he didn't need to worry, every stuffy gurgle and raspy cry she made had his heart racing with uncertainty.

He lifted her so she was resting on his shoulder, and he started humming a quiet song in a lame attempt to comfort her.

She cried louder.

To his left, the front door to the apartment opened, and Ash turned his head to see Shaina pushing the door closed with her foot, her arms full of grocery bags.

"Do you need help?" he asked, raising his voice so she could hear him over Bri's cries.

"No, this is everything," Shaina replied as she made a beeline for the kitchen, where she quickly set the groceries down on the counter. "Do *you* need help?"

He grimaced as their eyes met and then shook his head but stood, rubbing Bri's back with one hand. "She's so uncomfortable, it almost hurts *me*."

"I know," Shaina said quietly. She met him halfway to the kitchen and carefully lifted Bri from his arms. It took a good few minutes or so, but with Shaina's gentle swaying and some quiet murmurs of nonsense words, Bri's crying finally seemed to quiet, at least momentarily. Without looking up,

Shaina said, “How about you put away the groceries, and I’ll see if I can get her to nap?”

Ash nodded and then leaned in and kissed Bri’s forehead. “Rest, sweet girl,” he murmured softly. “Thanks, Shai.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” she replied, giving him a crooked half smile.

He laughed weakly and turned toward the kitchen as Shaina took Bri back into the bedroom. The shopping bags on the counter were filled to the brim, and he took his time putting everything away. Shaina had stuffed the receipt in the bottom of one of the bags, and he scanned it with a frown. How had three bags of groceries totaled over one hundred fifty dollars? And that hadn’t even included any diapers or baby wipes or any big-ticket items. Just basic food and formula.

He’d been putting off budgeting and looking at his finances, just like he’d been putting off worrying about how the hell he was going to afford childcare. Time was running out, though; he only had another two weeks until classes started again. He couldn’t put it off much longer.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he set down the receipt and pulled his phone out, welcoming the distraction. He had multiple notifications, some from over an hour ago, which he must have missed while he was taking care of Bri. The newest, though, was a text from Shaina. He clicked, and the relief was immediate. She’d sent a selfie of her reclining back on Ash’s bed, holding Bri. Bri was obviously sleeping, her eyes closed lightly and her face relaxed and soft.

*Shaina (4:47 p.m.):* Not a chance in the crib, but she’s out like this. Given how exhausted she is, she’ll probably be down for a while. Can you start dinner? I was going to make Frieda’s chicken, which I hope you remember since you used to LOVE it :) The first step is just marinating the diced chicken in eggs for an hour, use two eggs

*Ash (4:49 p.m.):* You’re a miracle worker, seriously

*Ash (4:50 p.m.):* I got it, no worries :)

He busied himself in the kitchen for a few minutes to get the chicken marinating and then hesitated for a minute before giving himself permission to collapse back onto the couch—this time on his back.

He'd never felt so exhausted, although "exhausted" was quickly becoming the norm. Even after his drive down to California when he found out his sister had passed and after the multiday trip back up here to Seattle, he hadn't felt like this. Maybe it was because he knew he couldn't really just rest. He had too much to do, too many things piling up, and now a tiny little person who depended on him to get his act together.

So, he continued ignoring the rest of his notifications for a few minutes and did a quick search on his phone for daycare centers nearby. His head started hurting, however, as soon as he looked even a little more closely into the going rate for infant care. He was about to shut off his phone and go scream into a pillow when a new notification popped up.

*Cass (5:18 p.m.):* Seriously! 15 boxes and 1000 pennies!

Ash's brain was not at all dialed in to whatever conversation they'd been having earlier in the day, and so he stared at the message for several seconds, confused, before shaking himself out of his daze and scrolling up to read their previous messages.

*Ash (11:31 a.m.):* We don't have plans, really. Shaina's parents are coming up from LA on Thursday and staying the weekend. We'll probably go out Christmas Eve to check out the Christmas lights, we used to do that when we were kids

*Cass (11:35 a.m.):* Ah, have you been to see that one famous house? I know it's in Seattle, but I can't remember the family's name. I've seen it on the news several times

*Ash (11:36 a.m.):* Oh, yeah, the Menashe family. They're in West Seattle. That's not where we used to go, but maybe we will this time. It'll be up to Shai, I'll just be along for the ride

*Ash (11:38 a.m.):* What about you? Plans? Traditions? Anything?

*Cass (11:50 a.m.):* Plans have changed. I thought we were just staying home, but now my mom wants to go down to Stockton to see everyone. It's going to be rough, though. Traveling is hard on her

*Cass (11:51 a.m.):* Traditions, hmm, not really? My uncle used to be a bit of a prankster, so maybe I'll get another 1000 tape-wrapped pennies inside a box inside a box inside a box (times 15!)

*Ash (12:54 p.m.):* 15 boxes?

*Ash (12:54 p.m.):* And seriously, 1000 pennies???

*Cass (5:18 p.m.):* Seriously! 15 boxes and 1000 pennies!

*Cass (5:19 p.m.):* Hardest earned $10 I've ever had lol

Somehow, Ash could almost picture Cass laughing, his brown eyes lit up with amusement and his smile warm and welcoming, and despite the heaviness of everything sitting on Ash's shoulders right then, he found a tired smile growing on his lips. He bent his knees up and started typing a response.

*Ash (5:24 p.m.):* What did you buy with it?

*Cass (5:25 p.m.):* Ahhh, you don't want to know

Ash narrowed his eyes and almost snorted a laugh.

*Ash (5:25 p.m.):* Yes, in fact I do

*Cass (5:26 p.m.):* Okay, but you can't make fun of me

*Ash (5:26 p.m.):* Why is this suspense more exciting than pretty much my whole day?

*Cass (5:27 p.m.):* It's not, really. It's actually just sort of embarrassing for me

*Cass (5:28 p.m.):* I bought a book

*Ash (5:28 p.m.):* I fail to see how that's embarrassing in any way =P

*Cass (5:29 p.m.):* That's because I didn't tell you why I bought the book or what book it was or that I still have that book sitting on my shelf in my bedroom

A picture came through then, and Ash immediately recognized the book as the first book in the *Magic Tree House* series, a very popular series of early children's chapter books. He distinctly remembered reading the book, and the entire series, actually, when he was in kindergarten.

*Ash (5:31 p.m.):* Still waiting on an explanation as to why you'd be embarrassed by this

*Cass (5:32 p.m.):* I was ten

*Ash (5:32 p.m.):* And?

No response came right away, and Ash frowned as he pushed himself to sit.

*Ash (5:34 p.m.):* I read that book too. I loved that series

*Ash (5:35 p.m.):* My mom hated buying us books, always said we could just check them out of the library. So every week, she'd take me to the library, and I'd get as many books as I could carry

*Ash (5:36 p.m.):* These ones, though, I insisted on reading them all in order. Had to be exactly in order! But our library never had enough copies, and so I'd have to wait and wait and wait

He waited again, and just as he was starting to worry, a long text came through.

*Cass (5:39 p.m.):* When I was a kid, my parents read to me every single night, without fail. Usually my mom, but sometimes my dad or sometimes it was a whole family thing, and they both read to me. My mom was just amazing - she'd do voices for each of the characters, and if I asked for her to read me the same story every night of the week, she would. I loved it. And yet, somehow, when it came time for me to learn to read, I really, really struggled. It wasn't a big deal at first. My mom was a special ed teacher, and she wasn't worried until I was in second grade and still not really catching on. They had me tested, but I wasn't dyslexic or anything, and I didn't have vision problems (which I guess are two of the most common reasons kids have trouble learning to read when everything else lines up?). I had no trouble with anything else in school, and nothing really seemed "wrong," I just couldn't figure it out

*Cass (5:42 p.m.):* I also checked books out of the library, and this particular book, I wanted to read so badly. For years, I mean. I remember my friends talking about reading it, some in kindergarten, some in first or second grade. I checked it out from the library several times, and I tried and tried, but I couldn't ever finish it by the time it was due. When I got that money for Christmas, I asked my mom to take me to the bookstore, and I bought it, so I could learn to read it without having to worry about turning it back in to the library by the due date

*Cass (5:43 p.m.):* So, yeah, that's my story

*Ash (5:44 p.m.):* I never learned to ride a bike

Ash typed the text without thinking about whether it was a good idea to share that "embarrassing" thing about his own childhood, but it was too late to take it back, and so he continued.

*Ash (5:45 p.m.):* My sister barely took three seconds to learn, I swear, but I just couldn't get the hang of it. At all

*Ash (5:46 p.m.):* So when all the neighborhood kids would ride their bikes down to the park or something, Ashlynn would walk with me

He tried not to let his emotions overwhelm him, but the tightness in his chest started to hurt just enough that he closed his eyes for several long seconds, until the phone vibrated in his hand again.

*Cass (5:47 p.m.):* I thought you were like, some swim team prodigy?

With a huff of laughter, Ash shook his head, grinning as he typed back another response.

*Ash (5:48 p.m.):* I'm not sure where you got that information =P Also, apparently athletic ability in the water has absolutely nothing to do with the ability to ride a bike

*Cass (5:48 p.m.):* You said, and I'm paraphrasing here, "I made varsity my freshman year and beat everyone on the team in (some type of swimming stroke I can't remember)"

*Ash (5:49 p.m.):* Oh gosh, you remember that? It was the butterfly, btw

The timer on his phone went off, and Ash grimaced, wondering how the heck the last hour had gone by so quickly. He clicked out of his messages with Cass and shot Shaina a quick text asking if he should start cooking the chicken. Without waiting to see if she responded right away, he clicked back to Cass's messages, and a rush of warmth immediately hit him.

*Cass (5:49 p.m.):* Thank you for all of this :)

Ash typed and deleted several responses before settling on just a purple heart emoji. He waited for a response, but when nothing came after a few more minutes, he figured maybe Cass had needed to disappear to help his mom or something for a bit. He ignored the flicker of disappointment that rippled through him, which he sort of always felt now when any of their conversations seemed to come to a natural conclusion, and instead, he pushed himself to his feet. He'd just stepped around the back of the couch when the

bedroom door opened quietly and Shaina tiptoed out, leaving it cracked open a few inches.

“Oh my god, she let me put her in the crib,” Shaina whispered when she was close enough. She collapsed into Ash’s chest with a long, dramatic sigh. “Poor girl is so exhausted.”

“You seem like you are too,” Ash said carefully, stuffing his phone in his pocket and then wrapping an arm up around Shaina’s shoulders.

“Mm-hmm.”

“I can finish dinner if you tell me what to do,” he offered, and Shaina nodded into him and then straightened up.

“Ah, actually, let’s do it together. It’ll be easier that way.”

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed, and she looped her arm through his and led him into the kitchen.

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*Joe (Saturday, December 25, 2021 – 8:14 a.m.):* Merry Christmas!

*Joe (8:15 a.m.):* Safe travels today. I hope your mom handles the trip well. If you're free tomorrow, I'm cooking a pot roast. I'd love to have you over :)

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# Chapter Sixteen

## Cass

CASS PUSHED HIS MOTHER'S wheelchair slowly down his uncle's driveway and out to his car, only half listening as Aunt Sally rattled off the ingredients for the German chocolate cake she'd served for dessert. Behind him, his dad walked next to Uncle Dan, the two deep in discussion about some fishing location Dan had found a few weeks ago.

He gently stopped the wheelchair and set the brake, then reached into his pocket for his key fob as Sally knelt down next to the wheelchair and took his mom's hand.

"So, I'll send an email with the recipe, how does that sound, Paula?" Sally suggested.

Cass stole a glance at his mom as he stepped around to the car and opened up the rear passenger side door. Her head was tilted slightly to the right, but she was smiling a tired half smile. She looked happy.

"Yes, that works," she said, though her *s*'s were slurred and the words were slow.

Sally patted her hand and then stood and gave Cass a small smile. "It was good to see you, sweetheart," she said, and she stepped up to hug him, her arms wrapping low around his waist. "You're taking good care of her," Sally whispered in his ear as he bent over and returned the embrace. "Thank you for that."

She squeezed him tightly for another few seconds, then released him and straightened up, her eyes soft. Cass nodded in acknowledgement but didn't say anything, and Sally moved back so Dan could say his goodbyes as well.

That took a little longer.

Dan lingered there with his sister, talking to her with a quiet, gentle tone Cass knew all too well now. He missed her, and he was worried about her, Dan said. And he'd come up to visit when he could. More often. She assured him it was fine, though her speech continued to deteriorate with every word, it seemed.

She was exhausted.

Finally, Dan hugged her, kissed her forehead softly, and stood, and Cass stepped in to help move his mom into the car. It was another slow process, one that took all of his concentration and the rest of whatever energy he had as well. By the time he had her in her seat with the seat belt fastened, his dad had put the wheelchair in the trunk and was hugging Sally and Dan goodbye. Less than five minutes later, they were on the road, heading north toward home, Cass driving and his dad sitting in the back seat with his mom.

His mom and dad talked quietly for a few minutes, though when Cass glanced at them in the rearview mirror as he merged onto I-5, his mom had closed her eyes and was leaning up against his dad, probably almost asleep. His dad gave him a tired half smile.

"You're okay to drive? It'll be late when we get home," he said quietly.

Cass nodded. "Yeah, no problem. You rest."

The car grew silent, and the next time Cass glanced at them in the rearview mirror, his dad's eyes were closed as well. He continued driving north, his mind wandering in the same predictable direction it had been for a couple of weeks now. When he stopped for gas a little more than halfway home, in a tiny town called Willows, he stood outside the car while the gas tank filled, pulled his coat around himself tighter to stave off the chilly breeze, and took his phone out of his pocket.

He leaned back against the car and scrolled quickly through the mess of notifications to find the one he was hoping for.

*Ash (3:46 p.m.):* Merry Christmas from me and Bri!

Cass read the words, but his eyes were immediately drawn to the photo underneath the short message. Ash's bright blue eyes smiled at him through the phone screen, and something inside Cass stirred. He inhaled slowly, taking in all the details—big and small. Ash held Bri, who was dressed in some Christmas-themed onesie and had a red bow pinned in her dark hair. The baby was reaching up to touch her uncle's face, her cheeks pink and pudgy as she seemed to be laughing with joy. And Ash . . .

Cass clicked on the photo and then used his fingers to enlarge it slightly. His breath caught this time, the deep blue eyes staring back at him tugging at his heart. It was the first picture Ash had sent him, and it seemed a reminder, too, that Cass hadn't been imagining things back on that day a couple of weeks ago.

Ash really was gorgeous.

He had barely a hint of stubble on his jaw, and his full lips were turned upward slightly in a warm, comfortable smile that was so different from the smile Cass remembered. A few strands of messy curls fell over his forehead, and Cass itched to know what it would feel like to reach out and brush his hair back.

The thought made Cass's heart jump in his chest, and he blinked and forced his eyes away long enough to check on the gas pump, which still had another couple of gallons to go. Then he bit his lip and looked back down at his phone as he tried to formulate a response.

*Cass (8:22 p.m.):* Awww, baby's first Christmas! She looks so happy! Your sister must love that you're so good with her

The gas pump clicked off, and Cass quickly typed another text.

*Cass (8:24 p.m.):* We're about halfway home from my uncle's, just stopped for gas. We had a good day, but I'm worried about my mom. It was a lot for her. Anyway, I'm driving and gas is done, so ttyl :)

He stuffed his phone back in his pocket, returned the gas pump nozzle to its holder, and tightened the gas cap, then climbed in the car. He met his dad's eyes in the rearview mirror as he pushed the starter button.

"Everything good?" Cass asked softly.

His dad nodded. "She hasn't woken up. How far to home?"

"A little over an hour." Cass shifted the car into drive and pulled away from the pump.

"Good, okay."

They were both silent for a few minutes while Cass navigated back to the freeway. Then his father's hand settled on his shoulder, and Cass glanced briefly up into the rearview mirror.

"Thank you, kiddo. You know how much today meant to your mom, and we couldn't have done it without your help." His dad gave him a squeeze and

then let his hand drop away. “I know it wasn’t an easy day.”

Cass immediately shook his head. “She was happy. That’s all that matters to me.”

“Me too.”

He heard a deep sigh from the back seat, though he kept his eyes on the road ahead, distracting himself by focusing on the taillights of the car in front of them. And he let his mind wander again, this time to a pair of bright blue eyes and a smile that made his heart flutter.



“SO, ARE YOU A Sunday-night-football kinda guy?”

“Ah, no, not in the slightest.” Cass set his palm on the island counter and lifted his bottle of beer to his lips for a quick sip. “Would you believe me if I told you I’ve never actually watched a game of football in my life?”

Joe laughed as he finished adding a few more halved potatoes to his slow cooker. “I believe you. And I won’t take it upon myself to convince you to change course now. Not that I’m a big football fan myself.”

Cass grinned and set down his beer. “So, what are we doing instead? That roast has at least what, two more hours?”

“About that long, yeah.” Joe set the lid on top of the slow cooker and turned around to wash his hands. “There’s a few new movies that just came out. Wanna see if anything sounds good? Or we could play cards.”

Cass arched his eyebrows. “The man who lived in Reno for several years wants to play cards? You’ll wipe the floor with me.”

Joe turned back to Cass with a silly grin, shaking his head. “Nah. I only picked up a *few* tricks from my college buddies, and I probably don’t even remember them.” He paused, though he looked like there was something else he wanted to say, and Cass tilted his chin slightly, his eyebrows still arched as he waited. After another second, Joe shook his head again and then picked up his beer and moved around to the other side of the island, motioning for Cass to follow him. “My sister sent me home with an entire bag full of Christmas candy. We can bet with M&Ms. Or I think there’s also Skittles. Your choice.”

With a laugh, Cass followed Joe over to the couch, where Joe pulled out a deck of cards and opened up a bag stuffed with all types of candy. He rummaged through it until he found a massive bag of M&Ms, and they chatted easily as they played several rounds of Texas Hold’em, gin rummy,

and then some other game Joe taught him called scopa, which he said he learned from his grandparents when he was a kid.

The gameplay was quick and lively, and Cass managed to mostly hold his own, beating Joe almost as many times as Joe beat him. By the time Joe's timer went off for the pot roast, however, they'd given up whatever system they'd had for betting with the M&Ms and had just piled all the rest of the candies in the center of the coffee table. Joe laughed at the mess and said he'd clean it up later, but Cass shook his head at that and instead offered to put away the cards and candy while Joe finished getting dinner served. When the coffee table was clean, Cass escaped to the bathroom for a moment to wash his hands.

He took his time, pausing to stare at his reflection in the mirror after he'd dried his hands. He'd been having a good time, but . . .

He sighed and closed his eyes, reaching into his pocket to pull out his phone. He almost didn't want to look, because he already knew there was nothing. Yet he forced his eyes back open and stared down at the screen.

His jaw clenched, and he unlocked the phone, tapped through to his messaging app, and scrolled down a bit.

*Cass (Saturday, December 25, 2021 – 8:22 p.m.):* Awww, baby's first Christmas! She looks so happy! Your sister must love that you're so good with her

*Cass (8:24 p.m.):* We're about halfway home from my uncle's, just stopped for gas. We had a good day, but I'm worried about my mom. It was a lot for her. Anyway, I'm driving and gas is done, so ttyl :)

His eyes darted to the clock in the upper left corner of his screen. 7:32 p.m. Nearly twenty-four hours with no response. Not that Ash *owed* him a response. But given the daily back-and-forth they'd had for nearly two weeks now, he couldn't *not* worry. He wasn't even sure what exactly he was worried about. Had he said something wrong? Or had something happened? Was Ash okay? And Bri?

Against his better judgment, he typed a quick text and sent it, just a simple *Hey, hope everything's okay*. Then he tried to push away whatever the sort of anxious hurt was that he was feeling, slipped his phone back into his

pocket, and exited the bathroom, pasting a smile on his face as he made his way down the short hallway.

Joe stood at the table, lighting two small candles he'd placed on either side of a low centerpiece containing half a dozen red roses and a smattering of tiny white flowers. Cass paused at the end of the hallway, and Joe looked up, his eyes bright and warm. Cass laughed and shook his head.

"This looks awfully romantic," he said, stepping forward slowly. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you planned this all out or something."

Joe straightened up, his smile soft, and he shrugged. "Maybe I did." Joe reached out his hand toward Cass. "Join me?"

Cass stared at Joe's hand for maybe a second longer than he should, the heaviness of the phone in his pocket making him hesitate. It should buzz. It should buzz now, soon, with a short text back from Ash. *Hey, yep, sorry! Just got busy yesterday!* And then they'd carry on chatting about whatever it was they'd been chatting about. Bagels, he thought it was. Yeah. Ash insisting that bagels should be considered an essential food group. But it didn't. His phone stayed still and silent.

Joe stepped closer, the eagerness in his eyes perfectly clear. "The flowers are a little much, I know, but—"

With a smile, Cass shook his head. "No, I, uh . . . I'm just . . ." He really wasn't even quite sure what to say, and so instead, he just reached out and took Joe's hand. It was a pleasant feeling. All warmth and softness. And Joe's smile deepened. He gave Cass a gentle squeeze and then guided him the rest of the way to the table, let his hand go, and pulled out the chair for him. Cass felt heat rise in his cheeks. "You don't have to do all this, you know."

"I know. But I want to."

The words were said with a complete sincerity that Cass could *feel*, and he dipped his chin and nodded. Then he took his seat and tried to push away all of his anxious thoughts about his friend from Seattle so he could enjoy the rest of his evening with Joe.

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*Shaina (Sunday, January 2, 2022 – 12:45 p.m.):* Just landed at LAX

*Shaina (3:26 p.m.):* Call me anytime, day or night or whatever, for any reason at all. I'll answer. I love you. YOU CAN DO THIS

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# Chapter Seventeen

## Ash

"YOU'RE SURE SHE'LL BE okay? Maybe I should stay for a bit, just to be sure, or—"

Ash's frown deepened as he twisted again to look through the window into the infant room. A sweet, older-looking woman was cradling Bri, rocking her gently as they moved around the room. There were two other infants in the room with her—one was in a crib, napping quietly, and the other was lying on their stomach on a colorful rug, trying to pull their knees up under them. Bri's eyes were wide, and she had one hand stuffed in her mouth, but she wasn't crying or upset. In fact, she looked perfectly fine. And somehow, that bothered Ash almost as much as the thought of her crying.

"It's completely normal to be worried." The woman at the front desk, whose name Ash couldn't remember, stood and joined him near the window. Ash glanced at her and saw her looking in at Bri, a soft smile on her face. "But I'm sure she's going to be just fine. Lorraine is really wonderful with all of them. She'll take very good care of your daughter, and —"

"She's my niece," Ash corrected immediately, an all-too-familiar nausea rising up in his chest. He quickly shook his head. "Sorry, I just, um . . . This isn't easy."

"Oh, I understand, dear, believe me," the woman said gently. She stayed there with him for another moment and then stepped away, back to the desk,

as though giving him the little bit of space he needed.

He wasn't okay. At all. He wasn't okay with leaving Bri with these strangers, who seemed completely wonderful but were still strangers, and he wasn't okay with knowing it would be nearly four hours until he'd see her again. And he just wasn't okay, in general. He was so close to breaking down, probably for good this time.

He'd been a mess since Christmas. Well, since mid-November, really. But Christmas had torn him apart more, if that was even possible.

He cleared his throat and forced himself away from the window. "So, I have two classes this morning, but I'll be back just after noon. Can I, um . . ." He trailed off as the woman smiled and nodded.

"Feel free to call and check on her at any time," she replied, as though she'd known exactly what Ash had been about to ask. "I'll be here, or Susan might. We can even put you through to talk to Lorraine if she's not busy."

The lump in his throat didn't go away, but Ash nodded anyway. He needed to get to school, because he needed to do well in his classes so he could graduate, then get his master's, then get a decent job—all to ensure Bri would have the best life possible. And so, he needed to leave. His first morning class started in only—he glanced at the clock on the wall—twenty minutes, which gave him barely enough time for the walk across campus.

With a final look into the infant room, Ash took a deep breath in some lame, unsuccessful attempt to steady himself. Then he shifted his backpack on his back, shoved his hands into his pockets, and headed for the door.

The chill of the early January morning bit at his ears and nose as he walked, head down. He crossed Pacific and weaved his way through the walkways of the campus, and as he did, he found himself wishing he felt even the tiniest shred of optimism. After all, several very important things had fallen into place in the last week and a half, starting with Joanna helping him navigate Washington state's government-assistance programs. Even with the poor timing of the holiday season, he'd applied and quickly been approved for a heavily subsidized childcare program, making something as impossible as affording daycare for Bri actually quite manageable. Then, he and Shaina had toured several daycare facilities, and he'd lucked out in that department, too, just barely squeaking in when an opening became available at his number-one choice—a highly regarded daycare center right near both his apartment and campus.

He should be happy about all of that.

Yet every single thing that went right was just another reminder of how much had gone wrong.

There was an underlying hurt to everything he did now, and while realistically, he knew it hadn't been that long and healing from grief and loss took time—hell, he'd been through it before when his parents had passed—this pain didn't seem like it was going anywhere anytime soon. Especially because he didn't have the time and space to actually deal with it.

Every waking moment he had was spent taking care of Bri, studying, cooking, cleaning, shopping, budgeting. Every night, he collapsed into bed, desperately hoping Bri would sleep so he could sleep. Every day, he was exhausted beyond belief, and any time his thoughts strayed *at all* to his sister, it was like his heart broke all over again. And since Bri, even at not quite five months now, looked *exactly* like her mom, those moments happened much, much too often.

Shaina had helped him schedule an appointment with a therapist, which he *knew* he desperately needed, and yet, even that had been derailed when Bri had gotten sick right before Christmas. He hadn't gotten a chance to reschedule yet.

He rounded a corner and pulled his phone out of his pocket to check the time, his stomach clenching as it did whenever he looked at his phone now. Because that was another thing that had happened.

Christmas Day. An ordinary text from Cass. Words that hadn't been meant to hurt but that had been yet another reminder of his loss at an already much-too-difficult time.

*Awww, baby's first Christmas!*

Ash's steps stuttered, and he gripped his phone tighter.

*She looks so happy!*

His heart contracted, like a vise had taken hold of it in his chest, squeezing out every little bit of hope he'd been trying to force himself to have.

*Your sister must love that you're so good with her*

His eyes found the time on the phone screen, and he cursed under his breath, shoved the phone back into his pocket, and broke into a jog.

It wasn't Cass's fault. Quite the opposite, actually.

Ash had had plenty of opportunities to tell Cass what had happened, why he'd had Bri with him on that drive from Los Angeles to Seattle, why

he’d been so broken when they’d met in Redding. For some reason, though, he hadn’t been able to bring himself to explain that he was his niece’s legal guardian or that he was his niece’s legal guardian *because* his sister had passed away unexpectedly just before Thanksgiving. Cass had no idea.

So Ash shouldn’t have been surprised at Cass’s response to the selfie he’d sent. He’d taken that picture with Bri in a rare moment where he’d almost felt okay-ish—Joanna and Henry and Shaina had been there with him for the holiday, and they’d finished opening presents and eating, and Bri had been adorable and smiley and such a joy. And he’d made the mistake of wanting to share that moment with a man who had quickly been becoming Ash’s friend.

Whatever friendship they’d had growing, however, he’d surely ruined. He’d completely ghosted Cass, unable to bring himself to reply, even after Cass had texted him one more time to ask whether Ash was okay.

And the circle of grief continued.

With practiced detachment, Ash forced a sharp breath and then jogged up the steps to Miller Hall and pulled open the door at only two minutes before eight o’clock. He had to focus, and that meant not dwelling on things. For Bri.



BRI WAS NAPPING AND perfectly content when Ash arrived back at the daycare center. Lorraine chatted with him for several minutes, letting him know how Bri’s day had been. Then she handed him a sheet of paper—a little mini report that she said he could expect to receive each day at pickup time. It was essentially a log of Bri’s feedings, diaper changes, naps, and anything else important that had happened during the day.

Then Lorraine carefully picked Bri up—miraculously without waking her—and helped Ash tuck her safely into her car seat, which Ash secured into the stroller for their short walk home to his apartment.

The cold morning had given way to an equally cold and cloudy early afternoon, and Ash pulled an extra blanket out of Bri’s diaper bag and laid it over the sleeping baby before thanking Mandy—the woman at the front desk who had helped him that morning—and then exiting the building. Bri stayed asleep the whole walk and didn’t wake up until Ash lifted her out of

the stroller inside his apartment. She cooed quietly and smiled up at him and reached for his face, and when he brought her closer to kiss her forehead, she put her hands on his cheeks and squealed with delight.

"You're such a happy girl today," he said, spinning her around.

She giggled and squeed again, and when he stopped and shifted her to cradle her in one arm so he could start unloading her used bottles from the diaper bag, she began babbling an adorable string of nonsense sounds, punctuating each of her "sentences" with a messy, wet raspberry. Both the babbling and the raspberries had really only started a couple of days ago, and both, according to Shaina and Joanna, were on schedule or even a little early in terms of her developmental milestones. And even though he'd never say it out loud, he was half relieved her go-to babble words seemed to be "ba" and "da" rather than "ma."

"Is that so?" he asked after a particularly long string of ba-ba-ba-bas. He paused at the kitchen sink, setting the diaper bag up on the counter, and gave Bri another kiss on her forehead.

"Ba-ba-baaaaaa!"

Ash grinned, even as tears stung his eyes. "Ba-ba-ba-ba?" he echoed back, and she squealed in delight and blew another raspberry.

They played like that for a few minutes, and then Ash moved back into the living room and positioned Bri on her tummy on her play mat so he had his hands free to wash her bottles. He'd just gotten started when his phone rang. He dried his hands and turned around, resting up against the counter as he pulled his phone out of his pocket. Shaina's name lit up the display.

For half a second, he considered not answering. Not that he didn't want to talk to her, he actually did. He needed to tell her about Bri's day and that *he* had survived it, too, and he needed to hear her voice to remind him that he wasn't really alone in this. But at the same time, he was tired. He was tired of talking and checking in and describing his entire day all the time, and he was tired of answering all of her questions. Mostly, he was tired of having to skirt around his answer to the question he knew she would ask first: *How are you doing?*

*"Okay, considering"* was getting to be a hard sell, especially when the truth was so very far from that.

He couldn't not answer, though, and so he pushed himself away from the counter and made his way over to sit on the couch, close to where Bri

was now lying on her back, stuffing one corner of a colorful squishy block toy into her mouth.

“Hey, Shai,” he answered, flopping down on his back on the couch and turning his head to watch Bri.

“Hey, I’m on my way to class, but I have a few minutes and, just, well, how did it go? How is she? I assume you’re back home?” Shaina fired off the questions all in one breath, and Ash closed his eyes.

“Yeah, we’re home. It went well.” He blinked and shifted onto his side.

Bri cooed and let out an adorable squeal but then flopped both hands down on the play mat, inadvertently flinging her toy too far away for her to grab it again. She kicked her feet and looked like she might start crying. Instead, though, she blew a raspberry, brought one hand to her mouth, and began sucking on her fingers.

Ash shook his head. “I won’t give you a play-by-play, but I was more of a mess this morning than she was. The caregivers there are amazing, and Bri was happy. She ate and slept and played. I think it’s going to work out just fine.”

“Oh, yay, I’m glad. I mean, I thought that would be the case, but I was a little worried, too, you know?”

“She’s so cute right now, here, one sec.” Ash propped himself up on one elbow and snapped a quick picture of Bri, then sent it to Shaina. “Did it come through? She’s playing, and she rolled over from her tummy to her back again. And—”

“Oh my god, yes, it came through. Ohhhhh . . .” There was something in Shaina’s voice that tugged at Ash’s heart, and he knew exactly what it was. “Oh, Ash, she looks happy. God, I miss her already.”

He closed his eyes and lowered himself back down onto the couch, nodding. “I know. I had the hardest time this morning leaving her there. I can imagine how you feel. I’m, uh . . . I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“No, no, no, please, no apologies. I’m happy to be home, actually,” she admitted, a clear note of guilt in her voice this time. He shook his head, though he knew she couldn’t see him. “It’s still hard, to be here without her and Ashlynn, but I’m happy I’m home, really. Just promise me you’ll keep sending me pictures of her being adorable, and I’ll be fine.”

He smiled weakly and reached up to run a hand through his hair. “Yeah, totally. I can promise that.”

“Good. Then we’re good, yeah?”

“Yeah, we’re good,” he answered, pushing himself up to sit. Bri turned her head toward him and cooed and then started in on her ba-ba-bas again, and Ash smiled. “Here, I’ll make it even better.”

He took a short video and sent it to her, then listened again as Shaina laughed and maybe cried a little. And right when he thought maybe he’d be getting away without having to come up with an answer for the inevitable *How are you?* question, Shaina let out a quiet sigh.

“So, I know today hasn’t been easy, but are you doing okay?” The background noise coming through the phone went silent, as though Shaina had maybe stepped inside a building.

Ash leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. Maybe for once, he’d be honest and not try to sugarcoat. He wanted to. But when he started to say the words, they wouldn’t come. “I, um, yeah, maybe,” he managed instead.

At least that was wishy-washy enough that Shaina heard all the words he didn’t say. “Oh, sweetie. Wanna talk about it? I mean, I only have three minutes until class starts, but those three minutes are all yours if you need them.”

“No, no, you go ahead. I’ll be fine.”

“Ash.”

He sucked in a breath and then lowered himself from the couch to the floor and lay down on his stomach next to Bri. “You really want to hear about how sad I am, Shai?” he asked, unable to keep the edge from his voice. He immediately hated himself for it, though, which only made everything swirling around in his head even worse.

Instinctively, he shifted closer to his niece and reached out with his free hand to brush the hair back off her forehead. She giggled and lifted her tiny hands to grasp his fingers, and while that made him smile, it was as fake as any other smile he’d forced in the last week or so, even here alone with Bri in his apartment, with no one else to *really* need to convince of anything.

He closed his eyes. “I’ll let you go, don’t want to make you late.”

“Ash,” Shaina said again, and this time, he could almost picture her shaking her head, the deep sadness in her eyes seeing straight through him. “I don’t really care about being late if you need to talk. If it will help you at all, I can listen.”

Her words were sincere, and he knew she meant well. But he also knew there was nothing he could say and nothing she could say back to him that

would help right now.

He swallowed hard and then rolled over onto his back away from Bri, covered his eyes with his free hand, and cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, Shai. I’m really trying here, but I’m just so lost right now,” he mumbled. All-too-familiar tears filled his eyes, and he sniffled and wiped them away. “It’s supposed to get easier. That’s what everyone told me after Mom and Dad died. And they were right. Eventually, it did. But this isn’t getting easier at all. It’s harder. Every single moment, something reminds me of her, and . . . and god, it fucking feels like my heart’s been ripped out of my chest, like this huge part of me is just *gone* and I’ll never, ever get it back. If I didn’t have Bri . . . If I didn’t *have* to keep going because of her, for her . . .”

The thought stalled out, and that deep, dark loneliness that he’d been trying so hard to keep at bay surrounded him, suffocating in its heaviness. He quickly rolled onto his side and scooted closer to his niece.

“Ba-ba-ba-baaaa! Ada-da-da-ba!”

She grabbed his hair this time, closing her pudgy little fist around a big chunk of it and tugging. It hurt just enough that he huffed a strained laugh as Shaina’s voice came through on the phone.

“Ash, god, I’m so sorry. I want to say I know how you feel, because your words, I could have said them too. She was my best friend, and it hurts so much that she’s gone. But I know it has to be so much deeper and so much worse for you, and I hate that there’s nothing I can do to help.”

“Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba!”

There was a muffled laugh through the phone speaker, though it was still tinged with sadness. “She’s so stinking precious,” Shaina said softly.

“She is,” Ash agreed. He managed to get Bri to loosen her grip on his hair, and then he watched as she took a hold of his finger instead. She smiled and gurgled and laughed, and it hurt his heart even more. “She’s beautiful, too, Shai,” he said quietly.

“You’ll get through this. You will. It’ll take time, and it’ll probably always hurt. But it won’t be this bad forever, Ash. I promise.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re probably right.” He paused, feeling an uncomfortable tightness in his chest. Then he said, “I know you have to get to class, but thanks for calling. Sorry I’m—” He cut himself off and shook his head. “I mean, I’m trying to do my best here, and it’s hard, but I’ll keep going.”

“Yeah.”

Part of him suddenly and desperately needed to keep talking longer. To tell her more about how much everything hurt, to listen to her tell him the same. He wanted to just *talk*, too. About everything and nothing, about life and school and the future. Hell . . . he hadn't told *her* about his sexuality, either, just like how he hadn't told Ashlynn. And she'd probably have advice on how to talk to Cass, too—how to apologize for ghosting him and how to finally admit to Cass why he'd spiraled big-time after Cass's last texts.

"Call me later? Or, actually, maybe it's better if I call you? Can I call you? Tonight, after I put Bri to bed?" He fumbled over his words, overwhelmed by a nervousness that didn't really make a ton of sense to him.

Shaina's voice softened. "Yeah, that works. Call me anytime. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay." He propped himself back up on one elbow. "I love you, Shai."

"Love you, too, Ash."

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*Matty (Friday, January 14, 2022 – 10:56 a.m.):* Yo! So, you and Joe? Seems like it's going well? I told you he's a good guy. Text me, we should get together and catch up

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# Chapter Eighteen

## Cass

ALL DAY ON FRIDAY, Cass pretended not to be glued to his phone, hyperaware of every single time it buzzed or dinged or vibrated in his pocket. All day, he tried to keep himself otherwise occupied. He cooked breakfast for his mom and then did the dishes afterward. He did laundry, changed the sheets on his bed. He took his mom out to Turtle Bay again. He even spent an entire hour organizing his parents' books on their bookshelves in the living room—first by genre and then alphabetically.

As the day wore on, however, he started to fret. And by the time his dad got home at six thirty, he'd resigned himself to what had to be bad news. He'd obviously *not* gotten accepted into the online MLIS program at University of Washington, or they'd have sent him an email by now, since today was the notification deadline.

At around eight, Joe called him and invited him out to Westside for drinks with Matty and Tam. Cass hesitated but then ultimately decided he'd be better off moping in the presence of his friends than moping around alone at home. So he said yes.

He'd only just pulled into a parking spot in the lot at Westside when his phone buzzed once and then once more. He turned off the engine and reached over to the passenger seat, fully expecting to see a text message notification from Joe or Matty. Instead, there it was—the email he'd been not-so-patiently waiting for all day.

The subject header read *Welcome to the UW MLIS Program*.

Cass’s hands immediately started to shake, and he pressed his thumb onto the screen to unlock it and then clicked the email notification and read silently.

*Dear Caspian,*

*Congratulations! On behalf of the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) Admissions Committee and the Information School faculty, we are pleased to offer you admission to the MLIS online program for the Fall 2022 term.*

That was as far as he got before a knock on his window startled him, making him jump slightly in his seat. He looked up to see Joe standing outside his car, grinning. Quickly, Cass unfastened his seat belt and opened the door.

“Is that what I think it is?” Joe asked, and Cass could only nod and grin as he shoved the phone at Joe and climbed out of the car. Joe’s eyes lit up, and he looked down at the screen, his smile growing bigger. “Holy shit, you got in?”

“Yeah, yeah. I literally *just* got the email,” Cass confirmed. He straightened up and watched Joe read through the email, an excited buzzing in his chest.

When Joe finished reading, he lifted his eyes, shaking his head slightly. “Damn. This is incredible, man. Congrats,” Joe said, and he handed Cass back the phone and then immediately pulled him in for a hug.

It felt good in a way that Cass was starting to get used to, and he grinned again and wrapped his arms low around Joe’s waist in return. Then he shook his head and started laughing. He couldn’t completely control it, but it also felt good, and so he didn’t really try to. Joe straightened up, still holding Cass, and with a wide smile, he leaned in and pressed a short kiss to Cass’s lips.

“Guess we’re here to celebrate, then, huh?” Joe said, his eyes bright with enthusiasm.

“Guess so,” Cass agreed.

Joe stretched up to him one more time, and their lips met again in another kiss that lingered for a second. It was pleasant, like the hug, and Cass found

himself smiling into it.

Joe hummed and pulled back, also smiling. “Shall we?” Stepping away, Joe offered his hand to Cass, who nodded, and together, the two headed out of the parking lot and toward the bar.

Inside was warm and loud, as was typical for a Friday night, and after a moment of scanning the crowd, Cass and Joe found Matty and Tam already sitting at a table in the back. Joe led the way, still holding Cass’s hand as they weaved through tables and around other patrons, and Joe was quick to urge Cass into announcing his good news to his friends. There was much congratulating and more hugging. Then Matty collected Cass’s and Joe’s keys and bought all of them a round of beers, and they settled down to drink and talk and hang out.

When their second round of drinks came not long after, Joe’s arm looped up around Cass’s shoulders, and when refills came again, Joe got even more comfortable, his hand first rubbing down Cass’s back and then finding a place on Cass’s upper thigh.

Joe leaned in and whispered in Cass’s ear, “Is this okay?”

It was, at least in his current slightly tipsy state, so Cass nodded his consent and shifted his arm up around Joe’s shoulders.

He tapped out after that round of drinks, however, not wanting to have any regrets or do something stupid, and then excused himself to go to the bathroom. He took his time relieving himself and washing his hands and was heading back out to rejoin his friends when his phone buzzed from his pocket. Figuring it was Joe checking on him or maybe Brendan, he pulled the phone out and then froze with one foot out the bathroom door, his eyes locked on the notification on the screen.

It was a text message.

From Ash.

Ash, whom he hadn’t heard from in *weeks* now, not since Christmas.

Cass stepped out of the bathroom to let another man enter and then hesitated in the hallway. He glanced toward the main room, where his friends were, trying to reason himself into waiting until later to read Ash’s text. After all, Ash had taken three weeks to get back to him; Cass could let the text go unread for a few hours. But even though that seemed like the best idea, it wasn’t what he really wanted. Frowning, he scooted a bit farther away from the bathroom door, leaned back against the wall, and clicked on the notification.

A wall of text met him.

*Ash (9:42 p.m.):* Hey, sorry for just disappearing like that. And apologies in advance for the length of this message, but I feel like I owe you a full explanation.

Back in mid-November, my twin sister Ashlynn passed away. It was completely unexpected, sudden cardiac arrest with no signs or warnings or anything. For all anyone knew, she was perfectly fine and healthy. As her only living relative, I became Bri's sole caretaker and now legal guardian.

When we met in CA, I was trying to drive back home to Seattle with Bri and all of my sister's belongings in that U-Haul. I'm forever grateful for the help you gave me, a complete stranger, even though you didn't know my story, and I've appreciated getting to know you through our text conversations in the weeks after I finally made it home.

I don't know why I never mentioned my sister to you or never told you that Bri is now legally my responsibility. Maybe it was just nice to have a "normal" interaction with someone who didn't know.

This last Christmas was my first Christmas ever without my sister, and when I read your response to the picture I sent, I couldn't handle it. It's obviously not your fault, and I don't blame you at all. I just couldn't reply then, and it's taken me this long to find the strength to write to you and explain.

I'm sorry again for ghosting you. It wasn't my best moment. I hope we can chat more soon.

-Ash

So many little pieces fell into place as Cass read and reread the text—why Ash's emotions had seemed so volatile when they'd first met, why Ash had been towing a U-Haul through the snow, why he'd always seemed to keep their conversations off Bri. After his third read-through, Cass closed his eyes and took a long, careful breath. Then he typed a short response.

*Cass (9:48 p.m.):* Can I call you?

Thankfully, he didn't have to wait long for Ash to text back.

*Ash (9:49 p.m.):* Yeah, sure, give me a minute. I just got Bri to sleep (finally!)

*Cass (9:49 p.m.):* K

Keeping the phone in his hand, he weaved his way back through the bar to his friends' table. Matty and Tam seemed to be in the middle of some lively, slightly-too-loud argument about an anime Cass had never heard of, and Joe was just leaning back on the bench seat, shaking his head at them while he sipped his beer. Cass stopped next to Joe, put his hand on Joe's shoulder, and leaned over.

"Hey, I've gotta make a phone call. I'll be back in a few."

Joe nodded. "Sure, yeah. Everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Cass squeezed Joe's shoulder. "I'll just be right outside."

"Okay, sure."

With a tip of his head to Matty and Tam, Cass headed out of the building, huddled up against the wall, and texted Ash again.

*Cass (9:52 p.m.):* Is now okay?

Ash texted back with a thumbs-up emoji, and Cass took a breath and then hit the call button and lifted the phone to his ear. It rang only once before Ash answered.

"Hey."

The immediate whatever-it-was Cass's heart did at the sound of Ash's voice made him glad he was already leaning up against the wall.

"Hey. Thanks for letting me call. I thought it might be easier than texting back and forth," he said, though he was suddenly not really sure *why* he'd wanted to talk on the phone rather than texting.

"Yeah, I understand. And like I said, I'm sorry it took me so long to respond."

Cass heard Ash blow out a breath, and he frowned. "No need to apologize, honestly." He closed his eyes for a beat. "I can't even imagine how hard all of that must have been. Were you close to her? Your sister, I mean. If you don't mind me asking."

"We were, yeah," Ash said, his voice quiet and not entirely steady. "She . . . she was my best friend, actually. It hurts so much that she's gone

and I'll never—" Ash seemed to cut himself off with another sharp breath, and Cass's stomach dropped.

"I'm so sorry, Ash," he said softly. He pushed himself away from the wall and shoved his free hand into his pocket. "You're incredibly strong to have stepped up to take care of your niece like you did. I could see how much you adored her. I'm glad she has you."

"I think I would be even worse off without her." There was a hesitation, then Ash added, "She's the most precious thing. Just yesterday, she got her knees underneath herself for the first time, but she didn't really know what to do with that, and so she did this thing where she rocked back and forth and back and forth, then she pushed too hard and totally face-planted."

Cass laughed and shook his head. "By your tone, I'm assuming she was okay?"

"Oh, yeah. She just giggled and tried again."

"You'd better hurry and babyproof your place then, she'll be crawling before you know it."

He heard a quiet laugh from the other end of the line. "I thought I was supposed to have a little more time, but yeah, I think you're right. She's . . . she's this ferocious little girl, does everything with her whole being, and she's stubborn too. So much like her mom."

The grief slipped through in Ash's voice, despite the little bit of lightheartedness before that, and Cass wished he knew exactly what to say. But he didn't, and so he said the first thing that came to mind, instead.

"Sounds like her mom was pretty amazing too."

"Yeah. Yeah, she was."

"Do you want to tell me about her? I can listen if you need to talk about her." It was a gamble, and really, Cass should probably hang up and head back inside with his friends. But something in his gut told him Ash wasn't ready to stop talking yet.

"Um, I . . . Yeah, actually, if you don't mind . . ."

Cass's heart stuttered, and he closed his eyes and nodded. "I don't mind. Tell me about Ashlynn."

Ash talked. For a good twenty or so minutes, he talked, and Cass listened. Joe came out to check on him at some point, but Cass just quickly reassured Joe he was fine and would be a few more minutes. Then he continued listening. Ash told him all about his sister—her free spirit, her hobbies, her passions. He told Cass how Ashlynn was an artist, and how he'd inherited all of her finished and unfinished paintings. He told Cass how she'd been on the

swim team in high school with him, though she'd sort of despised swim meets, and how she'd loved hiking and camping and kayaking. And he told Cass about how close they'd been, how hard it had been when she'd decided to move down to California with her friend Shaina for college, how much he'd missed her, even before she'd passed.

He heard tears in Ash's voice several times, but he also heard strength and courage and determination and love.

He was so invested in the conversation that he didn't even notice Joe had come back outside until Joe's arm slipped around his waist. He glanced down at the man who'd been such a great friend to him the last several weeks, the man he should be thinking of as his boyfriend. He smiled and tried as best he could, pulling the phone away from his ear for a second and leaning over to kiss Joe's cheek. But something about the gesture felt stale now.

"Sorry, almost done," he whispered.

Joe just nodded. "Take your time. I called a Lyft for us. They'll be here in about five minutes."

"Matty and Tam?"

"Trish is coming to pick them up."

Cass nodded and lifted the phone back to his ear.

". . . so she named her Brielle Rose after my mom," Ash said, his voice sounding both small and empowered at the same time.

"It's a beautiful name," Cass replied. He wrapped his arm around Joe's shoulders.

"That's what I told her too." Ash laughed weakly. "Sorry, I just jabbered on for way too long, but . . . but I think I really needed that. Thank you for listening. It means a lot to me."

"Yeah, no, any time. I mean it."

"Careful, I might take you up on that."

"Please do."

Ash laughed again, the sound like sunshine to Cass's ears. He smiled as a comfortable warmth settled in his chest.

"So I've gotta run now," he said, "but I'll talk to you soon?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

"Good night, Ash."

"Good night, Cass. Thanks again for calling."

"For sure."

Cass hung up the phone and sighed deeply as he slipped the phone back into his pocket. A heavy silence settled between him and Joe, and he knew he

needed to say something—to apologize for ducking out, to explain himself, maybe. He dropped his arm from around Joe's shoulders.

"Sorry about that," he managed, glancing over at Joe. He wasn't sure what he expected, but what he saw was just . . . Joe. Kindness and understanding and a gentle, unassuming optimism. Not for the first time, he found himself wishing he felt even the smallest shred of *something* toward the man he'd been dating now for about a month. Especially considering everything he'd just felt merely talking on the phone with Ash.

Swallowing back his unease, Cass shook his head lightly.

"Uh, it was a friend I hadn't heard from in a while, and he needed someone to talk to," he explained. It was sort of a lie and sort of not at all a lie, and he wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that.

But Joe being Joe, he took everything in stride, as he always seemed to do. "No problem, really. The Lyft should be here soon."

"Great," Cass said. "Thank you."

Joe just smiled up at Cass and gave a little nod, then leaned against him as they waited for their rideshare to arrive.

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*Grant (Saturday, January 15, 2022 – 9:40 a.m.):* A bunch of the guys are getting together tonight. I know you're probably busy but thought I'd let you know just in case you could get a babysitter or something. Finn's @ 8pm

*Grant (Wednesday, January 26, 2022 – 8:17 p.m.):* I've got an extra ticket for the Kraken game tomorrow night. You in?

*Grant (Sunday, February 6, 2022 – 2:01 p.m.):* Hey, wanna meet up on campus tomorrow for lunch? Long time no see. Hope you're doing okay. Call me or something

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# Chapter Nineteen

## Ash

ASH HIT THE BUTTON to submit his assignment at exactly 11:58 p.m., just a minute before the 11:59 p.m. deadline. Then he collapsed onto the couch on his side, closing his eyes.

Blissful silence.

Bri deciding to sleep through most of the night the last week or so had been the best thing to happen in the history of time, Ash had decided. Yet, he still found himself with a messy apartment—dirty dishes in the sink, dust gathering on the furniture, the trash overflowing—laundry needing done, and school assignments getting turned in at the very, very last second.

It was exhausting.

He *should* get up now. Clean the kitchen, take out the trash, and start a load of laundry, *at minimum*. But he couldn't move. His body was done.

And when was the last time *he'd* eaten, anyway?

8:24 p.m. had been Bri's last bottle right before bed. But Ash hadn't had anything. Maybe not since the bagel he'd eaten for breakfast on the walk to drop Bri off at daycare, actually. The whole rest of his day had been too busy to remember food. He'd had class earlier in the day, then a meeting with one of his professors and another class before he'd had to run to the store to get diapers and wipes and formula. He'd picked up Bri from daycare at three.

Then he'd spent the next several hours keeping Bri fed, changed, and happy while frantically trying to get his big assignment done before the deadline. The midterm project was worth nearly twenty-five percent of his grade in the class, and he needed to do well.

So, yeah. He probably hadn't eaten?

Forcing his eyes open halfway, Ash turned his head toward the kitchen, and, in a pathetic move that he only let himself do because he knew no one was around to see it, he reached out his hand and imagined he had some sort of telekinetic power to will one of the bananas in the bowl on the cluttered counter into his hand. When it predictably didn't work, he groaned and dropped his hand, and then he dragged himself up off the couch. He shuffled over to the counter, slumped down onto the stool there, and pushed a stack of papers and bills and a random pacifier out of the way. Then he grabbed the least brown of the remaining bananas from the bowl, peeled it, and forced himself to eat.

His phone buzzed in his pocket just as he shoved the last bite into his mouth. Leaving the peel on the counter—because he'd clean up in a few minutes, when his body had time to register that he'd eaten *something*—he stumbled back over to the couch and pulled out his phone. Then he promptly collapsed onto his back again.

The text message was from Cass, and even before he opened it, Ash found an eager anticipation spreading through his chest. He turned onto his side and clicked.

*Cass (12:05 a.m.):* Did you finish?

*Cass (12:06 a.m.):* Actually, scratch that. My *real* question is how does it feel now that you're finished?

*Ash (12:06 a.m.):* Oh ye of little faith

*Ash (12:07 a.m.):* Hit the submit button with an entire minute to spare

*Cass (12:07 a.m.):* Masterful

*Ash (12:07 a.m.):* Indeed

*Ash (12:08 a.m.):* Why are you still up, though? Doesn't your mom have an early appointment tomorrow?

*Cass (12:08 a.m.):* Yeah, but actually, my dad managed to get the morning off, so he's going to take her

*Ash (12:09 a.m.):* So you thought you'd stay up to make sure I got my project done? I'm honored

*Cass (12:09 a.m.):* xD Actually, I was reading

*Ash (12:10 a.m.):* Oh? Reading for fun? Something that existed way back in the ancient times of my youth

*Cass (12:10 a.m.):* lol I'm lucky I get this gap year before it'll be textbooks and coursework for me all the time too

*Ash (12:11 a.m.):* What book?

*Cass (12:11 a.m.):* Ah, it's nothing you'd recognize, I'm sure

Ash grinned and shook his head as he typed a response.

*Ash (12:12 a.m.):* So what you're trying to say is that it's either some steamy romance novel or, more likely, some totally nerdy nonfiction book about art or something. Am I right?

Cass didn't respond immediately, and Ash closed his eyes, shifted onto his back again, and set the phone on his chest. He almost immediately felt sleep tugging at him, and when the phone buzzed however long later, he jumped a little. Shaking himself, he lifted the phone.

*Cass (12:24 a.m.):* sorry, mom woke up not feeling well and dad needed my help

*Cass (12:24 a.m.):* The latter is the unfortunate truth =P

*Cass (12:25 a.m.):* The book is called The Monuments Men, and it's about a group of American and British individuals who did what they could to prevent the Nazis from destroying a bunch of very important art and cultural works during WWII

*Cass (12:25 a.m.):* Apparently they made a movie about it, though I haven't watched it

Ash blinked the sleep from his eyes and then texted back.

*Ash (12:26 a.m.):* Everything okay with your mom?

*Ash (12:26 a.m.):* Ahhh, right, I remember hearing something about that group, though I don't recall any of the details. Interesting choice of reading material, though ;)

*Ash (12:27 a.m.):* *cough* nerd *cough*

Cass texted him back a tongue-out emoji, and then there was a few-minute pause before Cass's next message came through. Ash hadn't almost fallen asleep this time, though he still also hadn't convinced himself to get up and clean the kitchen.

*Cass (12:32 a.m.):* Everything's okay with my mom, yeah. Just dealing with something of a reaction to a new dose of one of her medications

Ash vaguely remembered a mention of some change in her medications in one of their texts from a couple of weeks ago or so, although what he remembered more was the change in the tone of Cass's texts whenever his mom was mentioned—a shift to something heavy and sad.

Which Ash understood perfectly well.

A gentle tug in his chest reminded him of the last time they'd spoken on the phone—the *only* time they'd spoken on the phone, actually—when Cass had called him that night he'd finally convinced himself they should reconnect in mid-January. That conversation, which had been so very one-sided as Cass had let him just *talk* about his sister, hadn't fixed anything, not really anyway. But it had shifted something inside him, loosened something

that had been wound up much too tightly since Ashlynn's passing. He could almost think about her now without feeling the very real need to burst into tears. *Almost.*

He took a slow breath and then texted Cass back.

*Ash (12:34 a.m.):* Glad to hear she's okay

He sent the text before typing what he really wanted to: an open-ended invitation to call anytime if Cass needed to talk—about his mom or about anything at all, really. He knew he'd be happy to listen, just as Cass had listened when Ash had needed to talk about his sister. But at the same time, he also knew he was barely holding himself together as it was, and only because he had to for Bri. He was in no shape to be offering to be a shoulder to cry on for someone else. At least, that was the flimsy excuse he told himself.

Maybe if he repeated it enough times, he'd believe it.

He closed his eyes for a beat and then forced himself to his feet.

*Ash (12:35 a.m.):* So, you're heading to sleep then? Not going to keep me company while I try to make a dent in the incredibly impressive stacks of dirty dishes in the sink?

Too late, he realized that sounded like an invitation for a phone call—the one he'd just talked himself out of offering. His stomach knotted as he made his way into the kitchen and opened the dishwasher. He'd just flipped the water on when Cass's text came through.

*Cass (12:37 a.m.):* Rain check? I still have to get up early. Just about five hours now :(

An uncomfortable mix of relief and guilt made Ash sway on his feet. And underneath it all was a flicker of something different, something that didn't mesh at all with those other two emotions. It was warmer, maybe, and had an eagerness to it that he didn't really understand. He shook his head, not wanting to dwell on *any* of those emotions at the moment.

*Ash (12:37 a.m.):* Of course

*Ash (12:37 a.m.):* So I'll just leave the dishes in the sink and wait until you can keep me company to do them

*Ash (12:38 a.m.):* I like that idea

Almost as soon as he sent the message, his phone began to vibrate with a ring, and Cass's name popped up on the screen. And despite the uncertainty weighing on his shoulders and the echoed thought that he was in no shape to be offering support to anyone when he couldn't even *really* take care of himself, that odd, eager warmth rose up into his cheeks again. He closed his eyes and frowned. Then he let out a sharp breath, looked back down at his phone, and answered the call.

"I *was* kidding, you know," Ash said quickly, skipping over any sort of greeting as he shifted the phone up to balance it between his shoulder and ear. "I'm actually starting the dishes right now. See?" He pulled one of the plates out from under another, deliberately clinking them together loudly enough that he assumed Cass would be able to hear.

Cass's smooth, deep laugh rumbled through the phone speaker. "Well, that's good, then." There was another laugh, quieter this time, and a small smile grew on Ash's lips as Cass continued talking. "I just realized that I'm going to be busy almost all day tomorrow, and it would be awful if you left the dishes, expecting me to keep you company, only to have another day go by."

"Oh yeah, what an awful thing that would be," Ash agreed, his grin now brighter in some weird way that he could feel. He leaned over to stick a plate into the bottom rack of the dishwasher. "I'm not proud to admit I do have a stash of paper plates and plastic utensils that I saved from when I've ordered takeout, just in case."

"Oh, we do too. A whole drawer full of them, actually. Though most of the plastic packages only have knives left in them at this point. Well, knives and a napkin and those little salt and pepper packets."

Ash snorted a laugh and almost dropped the phone. He wiped his hand dry and then reached up and repositioned the phone between his shoulder and ear. "You never know when you'll need a tiny amount of salt," he teased.

"Or a napkin and a knife."

Ash snickered again. "Actually, funny story . . ." He paused only long enough to stick another plate in the dishwasher. Then he continued, glad this particular story wasn't about his sister. "So one time, when I was a kid, maybe, I dunno, ten or eleven, I had some friends over, and my mom ordered us takeout. I forget exactly what she ordered, but it was something we were all going to share. Probably pizza and salad or something. Anyway, my mom

asked the restaurant for extra utensils, and when the delivery came, no kidding, there was an entire bag filled with *just* plastic knives. Around thirty or forty individually wrapped plastic knives. Nothing else, either. No forks or spoons or even napkins. Just knives."

Cass was laughing on the other end of the line, and something about the sound felt good.

"What did you do with all of them?"

"Well, we did what any respectable ten- or eleven-year-old boys would do." Ash stopped loading the dishwasher and turned around to lean against the counter, grinning.

"Which was?"

"We pretended they were swords and used them to play fight with each other. Then, when we were done with that, we taped them all together into one life-sized sword and went out in the backyard to see how many times we could whack the tree with it before the 'sword' broke."

"Oh, of course. That's the logical thing to do with them," Cass teased.

Ash huffed another laugh and turned back to the sink to finish up the dishes. They continued chatting about random things while he worked. When he was finished, he almost didn't want to admit it, because that would mean hanging up the phone, Cass's "duty" to keep him company while he did the dishes officially fulfilled.

Cass was still talking, telling Ash about the walk he'd gone on with his mother a couple of days before, when Ash closed and started the dishwasher and then leaned back against the counter and shut his eyes. He tried to picture the scene Cass was setting—the quiet trail flat and wide enough for his mom's wheelchair, the gentle babbling of the river and playful chirping of the birds, trees just starting to bud and some early flowers starting to bloom. He smiled.

". . . She was feeling good enough that we were able to make it out to this spot she really loves. There's a picnic bench there, overlooking the river, and she wanted to stop there for a bit, so we did."

"That sounds so peaceful."

"It was."

"How often do you go?" Ash opened his eyes and frowned when he saw the banana peel he'd left on the counter earlier. He straightened up and pushed himself away from the sink to clean up his mess.

"If she's feeling good and if the weather is nice, we'll go once a week or maybe twice. But it's kinda hit-or-miss."

Cass yawned through the phone, and Ash grimaced as he glanced at the clock on the microwave. 1:08 a.m.

He tossed the banana peel into the trash. “Sorry to keep you up so late, though you’ll be proud to know the dishwasher is full and running and”—he opened the topmost drawer on the left side of the counter and swept his free hand across the solid white quartz, dumping all of the papers, bills, and other junk into the drawer—“the kitchen is clean . . . ish.”

“My job here is done, then,” Cass said through a quiet laugh.

Ash smiled but then pursed his lips. Why was the prospect of hanging up making his chest tight? “If only you could call me every night,” he joked, “maybe my laundry would get done, too.”

Cass laughed again. “And the sweeping.”

“And dusting.”

“And vacuuming and—”

“No, no, no, oh, dear god, no vacuuming,” Ash cut in, though he was grinning as he shook his head and settled onto one of the stools at the island. “Bri’s asleep. Let’s keep it that way for at least the next four or five hours so *I* can sleep too.”

“Right,” Cass said. There was some rustling on the other end of the line, and then Cass yawned again. “Then I’ll have to also call when she’s already awake, so you can have company while you vacuum.”

“I guess so,” Ash agreed, laughing again. He closed his eyes and tried very hard to ignore whatever was happening in his chest now—some mixture of that anticipatory warmth he’d felt earlier and an eagerness he couldn’t quite understand. “All jokes aside,” he said, “thank you. It made the work I’ve been putting off for much too long go a lot faster. It’s been a struggle lately to get things done that don’t *absolutely* have to get done.”

“Like dishes?”

“Yeah.” He let out a breath, wanting to go on, to tell Cass how hard it was every day, struggling to get even the important things done. To keep going. To remember to eat. But it was late. Really, really late. And Cass had already been more than wonderful and helped him so much. “We should both get to sleep, huh?”

With another yawn, Cass mumbled a sleepy, “Hmm, what?”

They both laughed, and Ash smiled, holding back a yawn himself. “Good luck with whatever you’ve got going on in the morning,” he said, pushing himself to stand and starting toward the bedroom.

“Oh, yeah, uh . . .” Cass cleared his throat, and there was some more rustling. “Thanks, yeah. My dad’s taking my mom to her appointment, like I said, but I’ve got a, uh, thing.”

The evasiveness in Cass’s tone made Ash pause, and he turned back toward the kitchen and lowered his voice, not wanting to wake Bri. “A *thing*, huh? Sounds super important.”

Cass let out a light laugh, but something about it felt strained. “Ah, well, um, my boyfriend asked me to meet him for breakfast before he goes to work since I’m free now,” he said.

“Oh.” Ash squeezed his eyes shut as two very, very contradictory emotions seemed to battle in his chest. He wasn’t even sure what either of them meant. But since he in no way wanted his awkward, single-word response or the even more awkward silence after it to be misinterpreted, he coughed to clear his throat and then said, “Well, I hope he’s taking you to that place you said has the world’s best breakfast burritos.”

He heard a snort and then a muffled laugh.

“Unfortunately, no,” Cass said, his tone clearly much more relaxed. “Joe’s not really a breakfast burrito guy, actually. But the place we’re going to has amazing omelets and even better French toast. And the coffee is acceptable.”

Ash grinned. “Only *acceptable*, huh?”

“Well, seeing as you’re from Seattle, I feel like I’m not allowed to say the coffee is incredible, because you’ll just tell me yours is better.”

“I will tell you that because it’s true. Mine *is* better.”

Cass laughed. “See?”

Ash leaned up against the wall and closed his eyes again. He knew he needed to say good night and hang up. Make whatever was going on in his chest calm down so he could get some sleep. But he couldn’t bring himself to say the words, for whatever reason.

Thankfully, Cass managed to say it for both of them.

“I should probably go. We both need to sleep.” He yawned, as though to prove his point. “It was great talking with you, Ash.”

“You, too. And thank you again.”

“Let me know when you need the push to vacuum. Or do your laundry.”

Ash smiled, and he ducked his chin as the flicker of warmth he’d been feeling for their whole conversation seemed to burn a little brighter. “I will. Enjoy your acceptable coffee tomorrow.”

Cass huffed another quiet laugh. “I will. Good night, Ash.”

“Good night, Cass.”

Ash hung up the phone and stuck it in his pocket. Then he lingered there in the hallway for a moment, still leaning against the wall as he tried to let the feelings in his chest settle. He couldn’t really name them, although one felt suspiciously like disappointment, and he didn’t understand that at all.

He took a long, slow breath and finally pushed himself away from the wall. With one last look toward his now-clean-ish kitchen, he flipped off the lights. Then he turned and headed toward the bedroom to get some much-needed rest.

In just a few short hours, he’d start all over. More classes, more schoolwork, more shopping, more parenting.

And maybe, if he was really lucky, he’d even get to do some laundry.

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*Dad (Wednesday, February 16, 2022 – 12:28 a.m.):* Hey, thanks for your help cleaning up that mess. I don't tell you this enough, but I appreciate all you do for me and your mom. She's back in bed now, hopefully asleep soon

*Dad (12:30 a.m.):* Love you

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# Chapter Twenty

## Cass

CASS PLUGGED IN HIS phone and set it on the nightstand as soon as he hung up with Ash. Then he rolled over onto his stomach, pulled the comforter up to his shoulders, and buried his head in his pillow, fully intending to sleep.

He *did* have to get up in only a few hours now, and so, he should be sleeping.

But sleep wouldn't come.

Instead, his mind jumped around between random thoughts. Mostly about Ash. Ash and their conversation. Actually, all of their conversations.

And a now-familiar guilt resurfaced.

He groaned into his pillow and reached over to pick up his phone again. After he unlocked it, he opened his text messaging app and scrolled down to Joe's most recent texts. The invitation to breakfast in just a little over five hours now was right near the top, and Cass's affirmative response followed, the words and tone so obviously a manufactured enthusiasm that felt like how Cass was living most of his life now.

Or at least, the portions of his life that didn't involve his conversations with Ash.

He swallowed hard and stared at Joe's "Great! See you at 7!" and then the three little red-heart emojis, and he groaned again, turned over onto his back, and closed his eyes, letting his phone fall to his chest.

Joe was amazing. Attentive and kind without being overbearing. Understanding and complimentary and sweet. He'd treated Cass with a respect that none of the other men Cass had dated ever had. And he was funny and handsome and smart.

But Cass had never spent hours in text back-and-forths with Joe or called Joe only because he wanted to chat. He'd also never had such a yearning to just *hear* Joe's voice.

They had a good time when they were together. Joe was a wonderful friend. But, even after dating for two months, Cass had nearly no desire for their relationship to keep progressing to anything more than that. He wanted intimacy; he'd always wanted it, in theory. But even when he really tried, even when he'd finally let them go mildly beyond just kissing on their date on Monday—his first Valentine's Day with a romantic partner—Cass couldn't actually bring himself to feel anything more than a sort of bland pleasantness.

No yearning. No strong attraction or heat or *want*.

It didn't make sense.

But more than that, it wasn't fair to Joe to keep pretending. In fact, it was starting to feel pretty shitty, especially since Cass *did* feel those things whenever he even so much as thought about Ash.

He lay there for a few more minutes, replaying the end of his phone conversation with Ash and Ash's more-than-awkward response to Cass telling him he had a boyfriend.

The single word "oh" echoed over and over. He still wasn't sure if it had been a good "oh" or a bad "oh" or maybe just a surprised "oh." It had almost seemed like something of all three, really. Which also made no sense.

Frustrated and exhausted and also finally recognizing the fact that he needed to break up with his boyfriend, despite all the reasons Joe was sweet and wonderful and good for him, Cass set his phone back on the nightstand, rolled over onto his stomach again, and closed his eyes. And he tried to sleep, reasoning that maybe things would feel less complicated in the morning.



THINGS DID NOT FEEL less complicated in the morning.

The second Cass saw Joe waiting outside the café where they were meeting for breakfast, an eager, enthusiastic smile on his face, all the resolve he'd had went right out the window.

"Hey, good morning," Joe greeted, eyes shining as he stepped closer and offered Cass his hand.

Cass faltered for half a step but quickly caught himself and forced a smile. "Good morning."

He took Joe's hand and let his boyfriend pull him in for a brief, chaste kiss that was, as usual, blandly pleasant. His stomach knotted up. He should do this here, now. Not wait.

"So," Joe started, shifting away and reaching out with his free hand to open the door to the café, "how's your mom doing? Any better?"

"Um . . ." Cass froze, his mind working overtime to play catch-up. He looked down at where Joe still held his hand and then lifted his eyes to meet Joe's gaze.

"Cass? She's okay, right?" Joe asked, worry flickering in his tone.

Quickly, Cass shook himself. "Yeah. Yeah, she's fine. Sorry. Um. Here, let's go." He released Joe's hand and reached up behind him to hold the door. "After you."

Joe hesitated for a moment but then stepped into the café ahead of Cass. Cass followed, stuffing his hands in his pockets. A server greeted them and told them to have their pick of the open tables, and Cass was thankful when Joe led them to one of the tables farthest from the door, in a quiet spot in the corner.

And as he always had every single time they'd been out together, Joe stepped up ahead of him and pulled out his chair. Only this time, it almost made Cass sad. He paused, his hands still shoved in his pockets, and he stared at the chair for a moment. Then he blinked slowly and swallowed.

"Thanks."

"Sure." Joe's hand found Cass's back and gently encouraged him forward. "Here, have a seat, and then you can tell me why you look like your dog just ran away."

That brought a weak smile to Cass's face, and he shook his head with a sigh. "Sorry, I'm feeling a little off today. That's all." He grimaced. "Kind of. I mean . . ."

“It’s okay,” Joe said, and his tone was nonchalant in a way but also almost slightly standoffish, which Cass hadn’t really heard from him before. “I think I know what’s going on, and I’ve been expecting it, I guess.”

Cass’s stomach dropped, and he bit his bottom lip as he looked up. Joe still had a smile on his face, but it was strained now, and the man blinked and lowered his eyes as though unable to hold Cass’s gaze. His hand fell away from Cass’s back.

“Joe, I—” Cass stopped himself, unsure of what he’d been about to say.

But Joe just let out a quiet laugh and shook his head. “It’s all good, really. I mean . . .” Joe sighed. “Let’s sit, order some food, and we can talk?”

Cass’s stomach was still in knots, and he wasn’t sure whether he’d be able to eat, but he nodded. “Yeah, sure.”

They both sat, and when a server came over a moment later, Joe ordered his usual huge breakfast, laughing that he needed all the calories after the ten-mile run he’d finished earlier that morning. Cass only ordered a coffee and a plain cheese omelet, and with his stomach how it was, even that sounded like too much. When the server left, Joe leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest as he blew out a breath.

“Alright, I’m gonna summarize, and you just tell me if I’m right. How does that sound?” Joe’s voice had that light tease back in it now, which probably should have made Cass feel better, but it didn’t.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “This shouldn’t all be on you,” he argued quietly.

Joe laughed. “I know. That’s not how I’m thinking about it, I promise. And actually, it would be dishonest of me if I were to just try to convince you everything’s fine and peachy.”

Cass frowned and looked up over the table at Joe. “You’re . . . not happy?”

The server chose that moment to stop back by with their coffees, and Joe thanked them and took a long sip from his mug before answering.

“Let’s see if I can explain,” he started, setting his mug down. “I actually *am* happy, honestly. I’ve enjoyed getting to know you, and I think we’ve had a lot of good times together. You’re an amazing person, Cass, and I really like you. I think you know that.” He paused and dropped his eyes to his coffee. “But I think there’s something missing. There’s no . . . spark? Maybe that sounds a bit juvenile, and maybe it would develop with more

time, but . . .” Joe trailed off and shrugged, then lifted his eyes to Cass with a half smile. “Does that sound about right for you too?”

“I could have said the exact same words, actually,” Cass admitted, forcing himself to hold Joe’s gaze. “I’ve been trying to get up the courage to tell you. You’ve been such a great friend.”

“But it’s kinda . . .”

“. . . bland?”

Joe muffled a laugh and nodded. “Exactly. I mean, I don’t need fireworks. Those are way overrated. But, I dunno, *something* would have been nice.”

Relieved, Cass chuckled and nodded back. Then he dropped his eyes to his coffee. “I should’ve said something a while ago.”

“Nah, it’s cool. We had a good time, right? I mean, I did. And hey, you’re a great friend. Honestly, a good friendship is just as valuable a thing, to me.”

“Yeah, for sure.” Cass smiled and looked back up. “Thank you.”

Joe shrugged and then blinked and glanced down again. Any remaining awkwardness slowly faded when their food came, and their comfortable, easy banter returned over the rest of breakfast. When the check came, Cass insisted on paying, and he was glad when Joe didn’t really argue.

Outside, the two walked a few feet away from the entrance and then stopped. Cass stuffed his hands into his pockets and blew out a breath.

“So, uh, which one of us is going to break the news to Matty?” he said, giving Joe a crooked half smile.

Joe grinned and rolled his eyes. “That one’s on you. You’ve known him longer.”

“Fair enough.” Cass let his smile match Joe’s for a second but then closed his eyes and sighed. When he opened them again, Joe’s grin had faded to some softer, knowing expression, and the man nodded.

“I’ll see you around, Cass,” he said. “Don’t be a stranger.”

Cass shook his head. “I won’t.”

“And, uh . . .” Joe’s soft smile faltered for a second but then returned. “Don’t settle, either,” he said. “You’re a wonderful man, and you deserve someone who sees that.”

His chest felt tight, but Cass nodded. “Thank you, Joe. You, too.”

With a final wave that was still awkward but also exactly as it probably should be, Cass turned and started toward where he’d parked his car, while

Joe turned and walked the other direction. By the time he reached his car, Cass wasn't sure how he felt. Relief, yes, but also a little lost. Maybe.

Joe really was such a great guy; their relationship had been the best one Cass had been in. And he was right, too—neither of them should settle for anything less than what they really wanted.

But there was one problem with that: What Cass *really* wanted—or rather, *who* Cass really wanted—happened to live about six hundred miles away.

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*Cass (Wednesday, February 16, 2022 – 9:46 p.m.):* Laundry time?

*Ash (9:52 p.m.):* lol totally. I've got a load to start and a load to fold. Call me in about five min? I'm just finishing writing an email to my prof

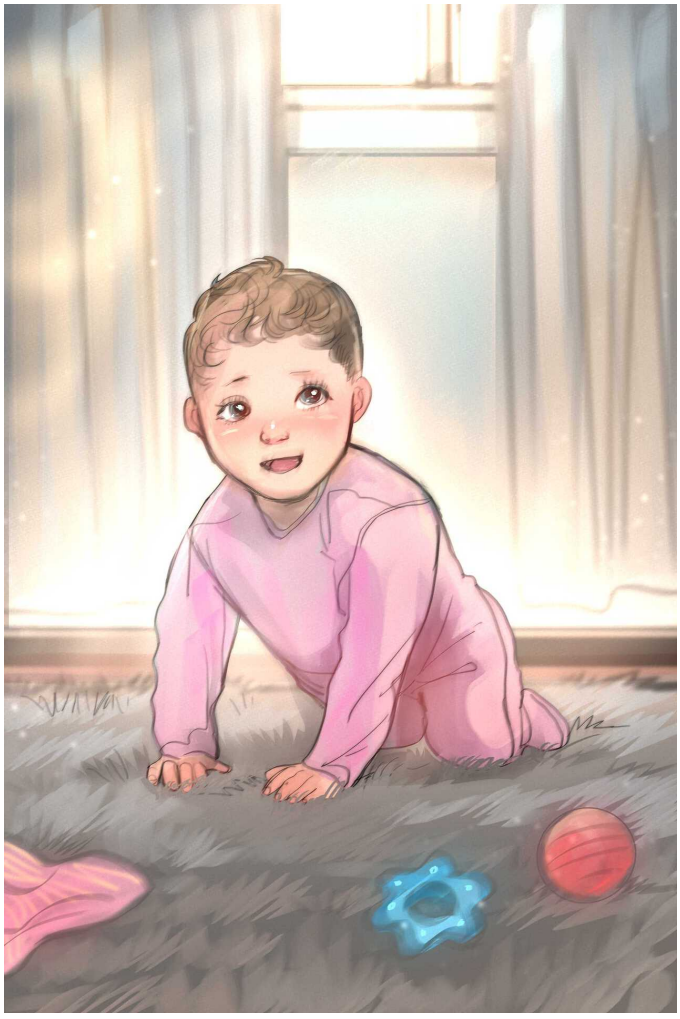
*Cass (9:52 p.m.):* Got it!



*Ash (Saturday, March 26, 2022 – 10:33 a.m.):* I'm in trouble. It's officially started

*Cass (10:34 a.m.):* Uh oh, what?

*Ash (10:37 a.m.):* Hang on, I'll send a video



*Ash (10:40 a.m.):* She progressed from bouncing and face-planting to run-crawling all the way from the living room to the bedroom in 3.2 seconds

*Cass (10:41 a.m.):* Ohhhh yeah, you're cooked

*Cass (10:42 a.m.):* Seriously adorable though



*Cass (Tuesday, May 10, 2022 – 12:02 a.m.):* Happy birthday! Also sending you hugs since I know today might be a difficult day

*Ash (12:18 a.m.):* Thanks

*Cass (12:19 a.m.):* Still think Bri's going to gift you with her first steps today?

*Ash (12:19 a.m.):* lol I hope not

*Ash (12:21 a.m.):* Unfortunately, she's decided to gift me with something much less fun. Ever heard of night terrors? Don't look it up, it's awful. She's been screaming and crying for almost 30 min now, nothing I can do about it except hold her and wait her out

*Cass (12:22 a.m.):* Oh yikes. Nothing you can do? That's awful

*Ash (12:29 a.m.):* She finally stopped, but if it's anything like last time, she'll be exhausted and super grumpy in the morning. I might need to stay home with her

*Cass (12:30 a.m.):* Can you miss class?

*Ash (12:31 a.m.):* Should be okay. Gonna try to sleep, and we'll see what happens



*Ash (Friday, July 1, 2022 – 4:01 p.m.):* Baby's first camping trip! I'm definitely going to regret this, aren't I?



*Cass (4:03 p.m.):* You’re braver than I’d be =P

*Cass (4:03 p.m.):* But also, like you said last week, it’s such a great way to remember your sister

*Ash (4:29 p.m.):* Shai said the same. Bri is already a handful here, but I love it. She’s insisted on walking by herself the whole time so far. She’ll be tired soon. Right? lol



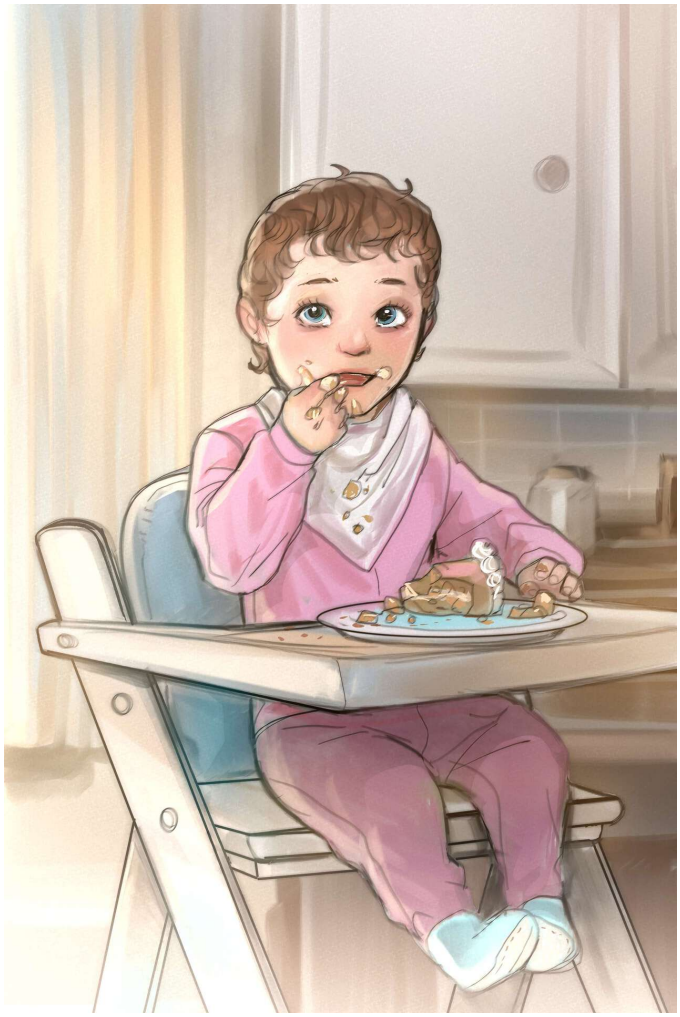
*Cass (Saturday, July 23, 2022 – 11:31 p.m.):* Short update, mom's doing better, but they're going to keep her here for observation overnight

*Ash (11:32 p.m.):* Good news. Thanks for the update. I'm available if you need to talk

*Cass (11:32 p.m.):* Thanks. It's been a rough few days



*Ash (Monday, Aug 15, 2022 – 3:55 p.m.):* The birthday girl is happy today!



*Cass (4:00 p.m.):* Ohhhh my look at that smile! Happy birthday, Bri!

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*Cass (Monday, September 12, 2022 – 10:35 p.m.):* So turns out the new student orientation next week for my MLIS program is having an in-person option this year after all. I might be making a last-minute trip up to Seattle!

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# Chapter Twenty-One

## Ash

THE LATE-SUMMER SUN DIPPED lower in the sky as Ash stepped out of the Rainier Beach Pool complex, his duffle bag hanging from one shoulder. He'd cleaned out his locker for the season and said goodbye to his work colleagues. Most of them had worked together as lifeguards at the pool complex every summer since they were sixteen, and he considered them good friends by now. And even though a part of him had wanted to stick around a bit longer, he was running late. Given traffic and the drive across town and the fact that he'd still have to pick up Bri before four, he probably should have left several minutes ago.

He broke into a jog, glancing both ways before crossing the parking lot toward his car. When he got there, he tossed his duffle bag on the floor in the back seat and then climbed into the driver's seat, started the engine, and got on the road, heading north along the west side of Lake Washington toward home.

Summer had flown by—filled with full-time work at the pool that would pad his bank account for at least a few months, helping him pay rent and bills alongside the money he got from his student loans—and school started up again next week. He was more than ready to get back to his classes, finish his degree, and jump right into grad school for his master's program. And on top of that, he was looking forward to spending more time with Bri. The whole summer, she'd been in full-time care at the daycare center—the cost thankfully still subsidized by Washington state—and so even though he took

care of her mornings and nights and all day on the weekends, he didn't like knowing she spent the majority of her waking hours in someone else's care.

The daycare workers were wonderful, and Bri was thriving in every way that mattered. She was a perfectly happy, silly, smart one-year-old who'd met every one of her developmental milestones, adored strawberries and mac 'n cheese, could walk and run and jump, absolutely loved hiking and camping, usually slept through the night in her crib, and insisted that "Un-ca Ashhh" read her the same story every night. At least once.

Still, he was looking forward to being home with her more, especially since he knew once he started his master's program the following summer, he'd be getting even busier.

His fingers tapped the steering wheel as he turned onto Eastlake Avenue to cross University Bridge, and only a few minutes later, he pulled into an empty parking spot in the parking garage, hopped out of his car, and jogged up to the daycare's entrance. They buzzed him in right away.

"Good afternoon, Susan!" he greeted the woman at the front desk.

Susan smiled up at him. "Hi, Ash. Just on time. Apparently, your little girl has figured out that you usually get here right after her friend Sammy leaves, and so she's been waiting impatiently for the last five minutes or so."

Ash's eyes widened. "Really?"

Before Susan could answer, the door to the toddler room opened, and a bright, happy voice called out, "Un-ca, Un-ca, Un-ca!"

Bri ran out of the room, her chubby little legs carrying her as fast as they could go. Ash knelt down to meet her, then picked her up and lifted her high in the air as she squealed in delight.

"Hi, baby girl, I missed you so much," he murmured, bringing her back down so he could kiss her forehead.

Bri giggled and placed both of her hands on Ash's cheeks, then she leaned forward and pursed her lips and planted a messy, wet kiss on Ash's face that landed somewhere to the side of his nose.

"Mwah!" she declared, and when Ash grinned, she giggled and did it again with another "Mwah!" Then she started chattering away. "Un-ca! Dadada-da! Da!" she said, pointing toward the toddler room. "Da-da-da!"

"Oh, is that so?" Ash asked, and she immediately bobbed her head up and down.

"Da! Un-ca! Dadada-da-da . . ."

Ash's heart soared as he listened to her babble a bit more, clearly telling him an entire story with her *da-da-das*. When she seemed finished, Ash

kissed her cheek again and shifted her to his hip.

Hallie, one of the daycare workers in charge of the toddler room, stepped forward and handed Ash Bri's backpack. "She had a wonderful day. Ate a really big lunch and took a nice nap earlier, too. We did some drawing and crafts—they're in her bag," Hallie said.

"Perfect, thank you." Ash took the bag and gave Hallie a nod. He turned back to address Bri. "Are you ready to go? Say goodbye to Ms. Hallie and Ms. Susan!"

He gave a little wave, and Bri copied him, waving one of her tiny hands and grinning.

"Bah-bah! Bah-bah!" Bri bounced a little in his arms as she waved more.

And all of her happiness and joy and the bright blue of her eyes and the huge smile on her face all suddenly triggered one of those uncomfortable shifts in his chest. He was plenty used to them now, and he forced a smile through the feeling—that godawful, sinking feeling that started up in his throat and quickly dropped down into his stomach like a lead weight.

*Ashlynn would have loved this moment.*

He couldn't stop the thought from coming, or the intense grief and overwhelming sense of emptiness that followed. But he swallowed it back, hiding it with a practiced smile, and tightened his arm around Bri as she kept waving and calling out "Bah-bah!" He bounced her on his hip out to the parking garage and to his car, and she kept babbling, going on and on in her limited speech about something or other. He made sure to stay present with her, nodding and responding with an "Oh, yeah?" or "Is that so?" whenever she would pause for long enough. But the feeling didn't go away.

When she was strapped into her car seat, he smiled again and reached over her to grab her favorite stuffie, Ollie the Octopus, which had fallen into the middle seat.

She kicked her feet and squealed and lifted up her arms to take her toy, and Ash watched, his heart hurting, as she hugged it and then gave it one of her lovely, sloppy kisses.

He smiled. "Ollie is happy to see you, huh?" he said softly, and he touched her cheek.

"Mwah!" She kissed the octopus's face again and laughed. "Un-ca! Un-ca!"

"Hmm? What is it, sweet girl?"

Bri seemed to stop and stare at him for a moment, and then, as though she knew he really wasn't okay, despite how hard he was trying to hide it, she

dropped her beloved toy in her lap and reached up with both arms.

"Ug? Un-ca Ash ug?"

The detached numbness in his chest, that emptiness that he knew nothing would ever *really* fill, deflated as he nodded and leaned in so Bri could wrap her tiny little arms around his neck. She planted another of her big, wet kisses on his cheek and then squeezed him tight.

"Uh ooo. Mwah!"

Ash closed his eyes, unable to stop a tear from slipping out. "I love you, too, baby girl."

She hugged him for another few good, long seconds, and every single one helped him more than she'd ever know. When she finally let go and picked Ollie back up, he was crying again, but they were tears of deep love.

"Ah beh-uh. Mwah!" She kissed his nose again, and he smiled.

"All better, yeah. Thank you for the wonderful hug. That helps me a lot," he said quietly.

With another of her big, happy smiles, Bri clapped, accidentally dropping her octopus stuffie out of her car seat. It bounced onto the floor of the car, and Ash chuckled with her, picked up her toy, and handed it back to her.

"Ready to go now?"

"Da!"

"Okay, hold onto Ollie there. Don't let him fall."

Bri giggled and squeezed the octopus tighter, which made Ash smile again. He scooted back and straightened up, then jogged around to the driver's side and climbed in. Bri was quiet most of the very short drive home, and Ash did his best to anchor his mind firmly in the present, where he could mostly, usually, sometimes keep all of his grief hidden and pushed way deep down.

He pulled into his usual spot in the parking garage at his apartment right as Bri started babbling again, and he let himself smile as he listened to her series of nonsense words. He'd just about convinced himself to get up and moving when his phone buzzed from his pocket. An immediate eagerness flickered in his chest, and he quickly pulled out the phone.

Cass's name popped up on the screen, and Ash tapped on the notification.

"Ah, he made it, Bri," Ash said aloud. He huffed a small laugh, knowing Bri wouldn't have any idea what he was talking about. "Cass is here, in Seattle. His flight just landed. Cool, huh?"

Bri squealed and said a loud, enthusiastic "Da!," and Ash laughed again.

“I guess you wouldn’t really remember him. But maybe, hmm . . .” He trailed off as he started typing a short message. Then he hit send before he could lose his nerve.

*Ash (4:33 p.m.):* Do you have time for coffee, my treat? I never really got to thank you properly for helping me last year :)

He pursed his lips as he stared at the phone, waiting for a response. He’d wanted to extend the invitation several times over the last few days, as Cass had been finalizing his plans for the short trip. But every time he’d almost done it, he’d chickened out, reasoning Cass didn’t have the time. He was literally flying in today and then out tomorrow evening, immediately after the new student orientation finished for his online MLIS program. Ash knew that was a flimsy excuse, however, and he really wasn’t sure why he felt so nervous about the offer.

It would be easy enough for Cass to turn him down if he didn’t have time or—Ash grimaced inwardly—if he didn’t want to.

But the little flicker of eagerness in his chest didn’t let up, even when he didn’t get an immediate response.

“Da! Un-ca! Da-da-da!”

“Yep, yep, you’re right,” Ash said, hitting the power button to black out his phone and then slipping the phone back in his pocket. “Let’s go inside, huh?”

“Ohm! Ohm!”

“Yep, we’re home!”

Ash smiled and shook his head at Bri’s silly giggling from the back seat. Then he grabbed his duffle bag and Bri’s backpack and climbed out of the car. After he unbuckled Bri from her car seat, he lifted her out, took her hand, and led them to the elevators, Bri holding tight onto her stuffie the whole time. A few minutes later, Ash unlocked the door to their third-floor apartment, and Bri tumbled inside, making a beeline for the mess of toys she’d left out on the living room floor that morning. Ollie the Octopus was unfortunately discarded along the way, and Bri planted herself on a small mat on the floor next to a basket of colorful wooden blocks.

“Un-ca! Pway? Pway?”

Ash set his bag and Bri’s backpack down next to the front door. “I would *love* to play with you, baby girl,” he said. “And then—” His phone buzzed once and then again, and he stepped over toward Bri as he pulled it back out. “And then, we can . . .”

*Cass (4:40 p.m.):* That would be amazing, actually. Are you free now?

*Cass (4:41 p.m.):* Or maybe in about an hour, I guess. I just got off the plane. Gotta catch a Lyft to my hotel and check in

Ash slowly lowered himself to sit cross-legged next to Bri, who had dumped over the basket of blocks and started stacking them. She picked up a blue block and set it in front of Ash.

"Pway!"

With a grin, Ash set his phone down for a second. "Yes! Let's play. Oooh, you gave me the blue block. Can I have a red one too?"

Bri said, "Da!" Then she promptly picked up a yellow block and offered it to Ash. "Bwa!"

He smiled. "Oh, I love yellow. This one is yellow. Thank you so much for the yellow block."

"Da!"

With a laugh, Ash took the yellow block and set it on top of his blue one. Then he picked up his phone again while Bri continued stacking more blocks on her pile.

*Ash (4:45 p.m.):* An hour is perfect :) The Ugly Mug on 43rd. I think it's only a block or so from your hotel. Best place for initiation into Seattle coffee (well, near UW anyway). They also have some food stuff if you're hungry, sandwiches, pastries, bagels

*Ash (4:46 p.m.):* See you there around 5:45?

"Bwa?" Bri leaned over and set a red block on top of the yellow block in Ash's stack.

"Oh, thank you! That's the red block."

"Bwa!" Bri declared, clapping her hands.

"Yes!"

*Cass (4:47 p.m.):* Perfect. Ugly Mug @ 5:45. See you soon :)

Ash blinked as some warm sensation spread through his chest. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and sat there for a moment, watching Bri build a stack of several blocks and then knock it over gleefully, clapping and

giggling and generally being happy and joyful. But his mind was only half present, even as he clapped right along with her and helped her rebuild another stack of blocks.

The other half of his mind was somewhere else entirely, wondering whether these feelings in his chest—the warmth, the little flicker of excitement, the eagerness he barely recognized—might mean what he thought they did. And if he was right—if they did mean what he thought they did—he was in trouble.

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*Dad (Tuesday, September 20, 2022 – 5:32 p.m.):* Glad you got there safely. Your mother said to tell you to have a good time and don't worry about her. She also said good luck on your date. I already told her you said it's not a date, but she's not having it. So, good luck on your date ;)

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# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Cass

CASS'S HEART THRUMMED IN his chest as he stopped along the sidewalk outside a building that he would have called rather plain-looking if not for the oddly shaped, "ugly" faces sculpted into the stone above either side of the front windows. A faded blue sign hand-painted with the words *Ugly Mug Café* hung above the entrance. And it sure was an "ugly mug," Cass thought as he glanced up at the sculpted faces again.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts, wishing the silliness of the café's name and façade had done *anything* to quell his nervousness. But it hadn't. He was buzzing with energy, just as he had been since he'd gotten Ash's text a little over an hour ago.

He had no expectations and no assumptions. He knew this meet-up was nothing more than a hangout between two friends—because that was what he and Ash had become over the last however-many months they'd been texting back and forth: friends. Good friends, if he wasn't being too presumptuous. But even though he really had no expectations, he couldn't stop himself from feeling an unjustifiable amount of excitement and eagerness.

Along with this buzzing nervousness.

Cass glanced down the street to his left for what felt like the millionth time, scanning for a familiar face among the pedestrians heading his direction. When he still didn't see anyone who looked like his friend, he frowned and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, resisting the urge to

pull out his phone to check the time. He didn't *need* to know what time it was, and he didn't *need* to check his messages to see if Ash had canceled.

He just needed something to do to distract himself from his racing thoughts.

He glanced back down the street, his eyes jumping from person to person, and he reminded himself again that he had no expectations. And that it was not a date.

And that—

A man and a small child turned the corner onto 43rd Street about a block down, and Cass's breath caught as his heart slammed to a stop in his chest.

He hadn't seen Ash in about nine months, save for the few precious selfies Ash had sent him, and yet Cass immediately recognized his friend. The man was even more gorgeous than Cass remembered—almost as tall as Cass but clean-shaven, with a lean build and dark hair that was sort of half-messy and half-styled. He wore medium-blue shorts and a light-gray V-neck T-shirt that was just well-fitted enough to fuel Cass's imagination in a way he shouldn't be letting it right now.

Cass inhaled deeply to reset himself and tried his best to rein in his smile. When their eyes locked a moment later, he casually lifted a hand in greeting. Ash's grin lit up right away, and he looked down at the energetic toddler who hopped along gleefully next to him, her light-blue dress swishing with every step. Cass couldn't hear what Ash said, but when Ash pointed ahead toward Cass, the little girl glanced in his direction. She grinned a huge, bright grin and then hopped up and down more, waving one hand while holding tight to Ash's hand with the other.

He had no chance. None at all.

Settling into a smile, he took a step in their direction, waving to Bri.

"Hi! Hi! Un-ca, Un-ca! Hiiiiiii!" the toddler exclaimed.

Cass could do nothing to hide the pure joy he felt, all that nervousness fading away. He knelt down to meet the child as they got closer. Bri stopped just as Ash did, about a foot away, and she grinned and waved up at him again, her chubby cheeks pink in the late-summer sun. Her dark hair was neatly clipped back with light-blue barrettes on either side of her head, and her blue eyes shone with intelligence and curiosity.

"Hiiiiii!"

"Hi, Bri, it's so nice to meet you," he said softly. "I'm Cass."

“Cass! Hiiiiii!” She waved one more time and then hopped up and down. “Cass, Cass!”

Fully aware that his heart was pounding and his cheeks were probably beet red, Cass straightened back up, lifting his eyes to meet Ash’s. Their deep blue immediately mesmerized him, and he had a hard time getting any thoughts to form beyond how beautiful they were. A flood of warmth spread through him, and he swallowed back all of his feelings and offered his hand.

“Hi, Ash. It’s good to see you again,” Cass managed, though his throat felt dry.

A playful sparkle flickered in Ash’s eyes, and he reached out and grasped Cass’s hand in greeting. “Good to see you, too.”

It felt like the world stopped. Or at least *his* world stopped—his heart stuttering as a jolt of the most pleasant heat shot up his arm. Everything else around him faded into the background, and all he felt was Ash’s soft hand in his, the grip firm and sure.

“Un-ca! Un-ca Ashhh, mik? Mik?”

Ash’s smile broadened, and he sort of shrugged a little as he let go of Cass’s hand and turned to Bri.

“Yes, you can have milk,” he told her. “And, hmm, what else . . . ?” He seemed to pretend to think, bringing his hand up just under his chin.

Bri giggled. “Stah-beh! Stah-beh!” she declared.

Cass pursed his lips as he watched Ash’s expression light up even more.

“Strawberries, of course! Milk and strawberries for Bri. Coming right up!”

“Da!”

Bri hopped and started toward the entrance to the café, tugging Ash along with her, and he glanced back at Cass over his shoulder and shrugged again. “Coming?”

Cass nodded, now failing miserably at holding back his smile, and he followed Ash and the very enthusiastic toddler into the coffee shop.

Inside was cozy. Even though they were in a busy area near campus, it had a sort of small-town feel. The walls were mostly covered in dark wood paneling, except one side where the smooth surface had been finished with black chalkboard paint. Daily specials and prices were listed on the top half of the wall, and the bottom half was covered with random doodles and scribbles. Several two-seater tables scattered throughout the room were

occupied by other customers, and two people waited in line at the counter, where a barista with short-cropped bright-purple hair was taking orders.

“Mi-ca!” Bri squealed, still holding tight to Ash’s hand but jumping up and down while she waved.

The barista glanced over toward them and flashed a grin. “Bri! How are you, sweetie? Milk and strawberries?”

“Da! Stah-beh!”

“Coming right up!” the barista said. They put up a finger. “Let me just help these other customers, and then you’re next.”

“Yay, yay, yay!!” Bri said. “Un-ca, stah-beh!”

“Yep, strawberries for you.” Ash leaned over and picked Bri up, settling her on his hip.

She was a perfectly happy, beautiful child, and her smile easily brightened the whole room. Knowing what Cass knew now about how she had come to be in Ash’s care, he felt nothing but amazement and joy when he looked at her.

He caught Ash watching him, and his cheeks heated up. “She’s adorable,” he admitted. “I mean, you’ve sent me videos and pictures and everything. But . . .” He kind of shrugged, hoping he looked a little less awkward than he felt. “Does she always talk this much?”

“Da! Dadada-da!” Bri declared, as though answering Cass’s question.

Ash laughed and then nodded. “It can be a lot. She’s been chatty since she started to make sounds, but in the last few weeks, everything now has a name, and she *needs* to know it. And she does her best to try to copy the sounds. It’s, uh, a little ahead of schedule developmentally, at least from everything I’ve learned. But . . .” Ash shrugged.

“I don’t have a ton of experience with young children, but I do know that what’s ‘normal’ varies, a lot,” Cass supplied.

Ash nodded in agreement, and they moved up in the line. Bri giggled and waved at the barista again, who waved back before turning to the person ahead of them.

“So,” Ash started, “I don’t know what you usually drink, but the white mocha here is the best. You won’t find better anywhere else on campus, I guarantee it. Same with their cappuccino. It’s just kinda perfect. And then if you’re hungry, any of their sandwiches are great. My favorite is the BLT, but I think you can’t go wrong with anything they have here, really.”

“That sounds good, actually,” Cass agreed. He wasn’t super hungry, although he realized he probably should be, and he decided that he’d see what Ash ordered and go from there.

When they stepped up to the counter a moment later, Ash put in his order first—a white mocha and BLT for him and milk and strawberries for Bri. Then he moved aside to let Cass order. After a second of hesitation, Cass ordered an Americano and a ham and cheese croissant. Ash paid, which Cass expected but still felt slightly awkward about, and then he set down Bri, who took off in the direction of the far corner, where an old but comfy-looking couch was pushed up against one wall, a coffee table sitting in front of it.

“That’s where we always sit, if it’s free, I mean,” Ash explained as Bri climbed up onto the couch and then plopped down and set her hands calmly in her lap.

Cass huffed a quiet laugh and followed Ash over toward the couch. “She knows the drill, huh?”

Ash nodded and stopped in front of the couch, and Cass was probably imagining the slight tension in his shoulders as Ash seemed to contemplate where to sit. Bri looked up at them with a big, toothy smile.

“Stah-beh! Un-ca, stah-beh!”

“Yep, Micah will bring them over soon,” Ash told her. He turned slightly toward Cass and then motioned to the couch. “Have a seat. If this is okay, I mean?”

He hadn’t been imagining it, now he was sure, although Cass didn’t know why Ash would be nervous at all.

Bri patted the couch next to her. “Un-ca Ashhh,” she said. “Da-da-da.”

The flicker of tension in Ash disappeared, and he turned back to Bri and smiled. “You want me to sit with you, baby girl?”

“Da! Da-da-da!”

Ash stepped over between the couch and coffee table and then hesitated only a second more before putting down the diaper bag he’d had hanging over one shoulder, picking Bri up, and setting her on his lap as he sat. Cass copied him, taking the seat on the other side of the couch. They both turned to face each other, and when their eyes met again, Cass could swear he saw Ash’s cheeks flush.

And that only made Cass’s erratic heart skip another beat.

He held Ash’s gaze for a long second and then blinked and smiled softly, resting his arm on the back of the couch. “So, I take it you two come here a lot?” he asked.

Ash feigned a grimace, though his eyes were still smiling. “Too often, probably. At least over this summer. It’s on the way to the Burke Museum, which is free for me as a student and Bri because she’s young.”

“Oh, yeah, the natural history museum?”

Ash nodded. “Yeah. Bri loves going because she loves to look at everything. So we went a bunch over the summer, when I wasn’t working, I mean, and we stopped in here every time. Now she asks to come here, even if we’re not going to the museum, and she walks in like she owns the place.”

From her spot in Ash’s lap, Bri started bouncing up and down and clapping. A second later, the barista appeared around the other side of the coffee table, carrying a tray.

“Milk and strawberries for the cutest one of the group, no offense to your lovely friend there, Ash,” they said, an obvious tease in their tone.

Ash barely had time to react, his cheeks turning pink as he shook his head. He opened his mouth as though to respond, but Bri cut him off with a squeal in delight. She slid off Ash’s lap and clapped, then immediately reached forward to the plate the barista had set on the coffee table and picked up one of the quartered strawberries.

“Stah-beh! Tank ooo! Tank ooo!”

“You’re welcome, sweetie,” the barista cooed. They set down Bri’s milk, too, in a special small cardboard cup with a thick paper straw, and then Ash’s and Cass’s sandwiches and drinks. “Enjoy,” they said with a wink at Ash, then disappeared back to their spot at the counter.

Ash’s face was still flushed, his cheeks the most adorable shade of pink, and Cass had to fight the urge to stare. Thankfully, Bri kept them both plenty distracted for the next few minutes as she almost immediately started babbling while picking up each of her strawberries and setting them back down.

Cass narrowed his eyes as he watched her. “Is she . . . trying to count them?”

“That’s what it looks like, but I really have no idea,” Ash said. “She just started this a few weeks ago, maybe. She does it every time. She’ll only start eating after she picks up each one and, uh, ‘counts’ it. She hasn’t really

shown any interest in numbers yet, which is fine, of course. But maybe that's what she's doing here."

Ash scooted a bit closer to the edge of the couch before reaching over and picking up his coffee. Cass did the same. He took a long, slow sip, savoring the richness.

"Mmm, this *is* good," he hummed.

"Told ya," Ash said, settling back onto the couch with his coffee in hand while Bri finished "counting" her strawberries. "Now you're gonna have to head back to Redding with your mediocre California coffee, and you'll never forgive me for showing you how good real coffee can be."

Cass snorted a laugh and shook his head. "Alright, alright. But my 'mediocre California coffee' isn't *that* bad."

"Eh, why settle for less than the best?" Ash was clearly teasing, but some weird flutter coursed through Cass's chest.

"A friend told me the same thing once," he said softly. With a small smile, he added, "Although, he wasn't talking about coffee."

Cass ventured a look up over the top of his coffee mug, and his breath caught as another flutter rippled through him. Ash was watching him with an unreadable expression, his teeth biting his lower lip. Cass's heart faltered as, for only half a second, he imagined what it might feel like to taste Ash's lip with his tongue. The urge was strong, a tug that almost seemed to pull him forward. He quickly forced his eyes back up to Ash's.

Ash almost immediately blinked and cleared his throat. "So, are you looking forward to tomorrow?" he asked, shifting his gaze to watch Bri, who was now quietly stuffing her face with strawberries.

Cass inhaled a short breath to reset himself, unsure what had gotten into him. He scooted forward and set his coffee cup down on the table. "Yeah, I am. It's going to be a pretty full day, especially since I have to basically head straight to the airport after the orientation is over, but I'm definitely looking forward to meeting everyone."

He paused to pick up the plate with his sandwich. Ash did the same, and they both took a few bites before continuing their conversation. Cass told Ash more about his plans for the next day, which included a full seven hours on campus with his professors and cohort followed by catching a 6:00 p.m. flight back to Redding. The topic jumped to Cass's mom and her health for only a few minutes before shifting to Ash and his last day of work at the pool for the summer. They transitioned easily into a familiar back-

and-forth about swimming and swimming lessons and how Cass didn't really get along with water when it was much deeper than shoulder height.

Bri cut in a few times, offering Cass a strawberry, which he happily accepted, and then insisting Ash get her toys out of her diaper bag so she could play.

By the time they finished eating and downed the final sips of their drinks, nearly an hour had passed, and all of that awkward tension between them was gone, replaced by something much more comfortable. Cass absolutely didn't want the evening to end, but when Bri crawled up into Ash's lap and closed her eyes, he knew their time together was almost over.

The barista came by and quietly cleared away their plates and trash, and Ash rubbed Bri's back gently, his smile fading a little.

Or maybe Cass was just imagining that.

"Ready to go, baby girl?" Ash asked softly. Bri didn't really answer except to make some muffled sound and snuggle into Ash's arms a little deeper. Ash glanced back up at Cass, and even though he was still smiling, there was definitely a sadness to it. "I should get her home."

"Yeah, for sure." Cass stood and made his way around the other side of the coffee table to where Bri had been playing with a few toys. Then he took a moment to put all of her things back into the diaper bag while Ash carefully shifted Bri in his arms and pushed himself to his feet.

The toddler might have already fallen asleep, though Cass couldn't be sure. She didn't move as Cass zipped the diaper bag closed and picked it up or as Ash led the three of them outside, waving a quick goodbye to the barista, who was wiping down one of the now-empty tables.

Once outside, Ash took the diaper bag from Cass and slung it over one shoulder. Bri mumbled something but stayed slumped against her uncle, her eyes softly closed.

"Thank you for inviting me," Cass said. He shoved his hands into his pockets. "It's nice to get to talk in person, you know?"

"Yeah, definitely." Ash held Cass's gaze for a moment that seemed both too long and not anywhere near long enough, and then he dropped his chin. "I should probably go. I'll text you later?"

Cass nodded. "Sure, yeah. Sounds good."

He knew he should leave then. Give Ash a little wave and turn and head down 43rd back toward his hotel, in the direction opposite Ash would be going. But he didn't move. And Ash didn't, either. Several more seconds

passed, and Ash finally looked back up at Cass, a small, lopsided smile on his lips. It was adorable, and the rhythm of Cass's heart stumbled before steadying again.

"Thank you," Ash said quietly, his words wavering under some new weight that hadn't been there a moment ago. "For last December, I mean. And, um"—Ash shifted slightly on his feet, still cradling Bri—"for the last few months, too. You've become a really good friend. I'm glad we could meet today."

Cass's breath caught. He'd been having such a great time the last hour that he'd almost forgotten the intensity of Ash's struggles. He hid it well, Cass realized.

It was hard to make his voice work, but he managed a nod. "Of course. I hope we can do this again sometime."

Ash's smile seemed to recover slightly. "I'd like that."

"Yeah?" Cass asked, trying to stem his enthusiasm. Ash was *not* saying he wanted anything more than to hang out again, and Cass needed to remember that.

But when Ash nodded, his blue eyes soft and eager, Cass's heart thrummed again.

Ash tipped his head down the street. "I should go. She's gonna get heavy pretty soon."

"Of course," Cass said, dipping his chin in acknowledgement. "Goodbye, Ash."

"Bye, Cass."

Ash gifted Cass with one final smile, and even though it only lasted for a brief flicker of a second, Cass took it all in, quickly memorizing every inch of Ash's beautiful face. When Ash finally turned away and started down the street, cradling his niece in his arms, Cass let out a breath, stared after his friend for another moment, and then turned in the opposite direction and headed toward his hotel.

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*Shaina (Tuesday, September 20, 2022 – 9:58 p.m.):* How’d it go? Can I call you? I’m gonna call you

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# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Ash

"NO, REALLY. IT WASN'T a date, Shai." Ash closed his eyes as he collapsed onto the couch, holding his cell phone up to his ear. A familiar scoff came through the speaker.

"You keep telling yourself that. Exactly how many dates have you been on, *ever*?"

Ash sighed. "None."

"Well, now you've been on *one*, but that's the whole argument—you wouldn't know what a date is because of your extreme lack of experience." Shaina cleared her throat. "Answer these questions for me: did he—"

"Shai, really," Ash cut in, but Shaina ignored him and kept going.

"—meet you there at the time and place you chose?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"And did you pay for both of you?"

"Again, yes, but—"

"And—maybe the most important—when you showed up, did he sort of smile shyly and say something like"—Shaina's voice softened and turned quiet and sweet—"'*Hi, Ash.*'"

With a loud groan, Ash rolled his eyes. "*Of course* he said hi."

"No, no, but like, *how* did he say it?"

The tease in Shaina's words was unrelenting and unmistakable, but the worst thing was that she was right. Cass's voice *had* sounded like that when he'd greeted Ash at the café.

“I should never have come out to you, you know that,” Ash retorted, and he rolled onto his side and stared across the messy living room.

“Aw, you don’t mean that,” Shaina said, and some sound like a door closing echoed through the phone speaker.

Ash sighed again. “No, I don’t,” he said. “But it wasn’t a date. I just wanted to thank him, and that’s what I did.”

Shaina let out a breath, and there was some more rustling over the line. Then, she asked the question Ash had been avoiding letting himself think about for some time now. “Do you like him, Ash?” All the tease was now gone from her voice, and she followed up with a quick, “Honestly, do you?”

He knew the answer. He’d known for sure the moment he’d seen Cass standing there on the sidewalk outside the café, that kind, soft smile on his face as he waved hello.

But he also knew it didn’t matter what the answer was. And he knew Shaina wouldn’t understand.

“Ash? Do you?”

“Shai . . .” He hesitated. He didn’t want to lie to her, and the fact that he was even considering it made a pain flare up in his chest. “Yeah, yeah, I do,” he blurted out, almost too quickly and too loudly, and he immediately grimaced and pushed himself up on one elbow to look over the top of the couch toward the hallway. The light was off in his bedroom, but the door was cracked open, and he held his breath, waiting for any indication that he’d woken up the sleeping baby.

Thankfully, none came.

“Ah-ha, I knew it!” Shaina said gleefully.

Ash frowned as he lowered himself back to the couch. He stared out across the living room again. Piles of toys were scattered on the floor. The coffee table was a mess, too, covered with dirty dishes, his coffee mug from that morning, and a bunch of papers he’d printed out for one of his classes that started next week. Several empty cardboard boxes, which Bri had been playing with a couple of days ago, also lay discarded around the room.

Swallowing, Ash closed his eyes, pretending the mess didn’t exist.

But he knew it did. And it was part of a larger problem. One he’d been trying very hard to hide, even from himself.

“So, tell me more about him,” Shaina continued, as though it were gossip hour back in middle school or something. “I want to know *everything*.”

“Shaina, I can’t.”

It was the truth. He couldn’t. Really. He had to stay focused on the one thing in his life that was most important. And that wasn’t himself or exploring his sexuality for the first time or deciding whether the hangout he’d just had with a *friend* had actually been a *date*. It was his niece. His niece, and school so he could support his niece and give her the best life possible. That was it.

Silently, and without expanding on his simple, clear statement, he pushed himself off the couch. The same pain he’d felt earlier rattled his chest, but he ignored it and instead forced himself to start picking up the junk on the coffee table.

Shaina hummed quietly and then said, “I understand. But Ash, you—”

“No. No, whatever you’re going to say, don’t. Please,” Ash cut in, setting his empty mug on top of a used plate next to the uneaten half of his breakfast bagel from that morning. “It doesn’t matter what I want or whether I like Cass or he likes me. I *can’t* do that right now. And—a-and . . . and . . .”

Ash’s knees felt weak, and for a second, he wondered if he might collapse. He screwed his eyes shut and slowly lowered himself to the floor as he tried to hold back a flood of emotion—a heavy wave of dark, negative, painful feelings with one, big, central theme: how the three most important people in his life had been ripped away from him forever, and in the most awful, devastating of ways.

His parents when he was seventeen. And then his sister not even a year ago.

Hell, Shaina was at risk just being his friend. And poor little Bri. Maybe doing his best for her wouldn’t really even be close to enough. Maybe—

“Ash? Hey, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

Shaina’s voice came through the phone speaker, anxious and slightly panicked, and Ash was almost surprised to find he was still holding the phone up to his ear. He rolled over onto his back on the carpet and bent his knees up, forcing himself to take slow, steady breaths.

“I, um, yeah,” he said after another few seconds. “Yeah, I’m fine. I—I’m fine.” It was an obvious lie. He was nowhere close to fine.

Except he was.

He had to be.

Or rather, he had to *pretend* to be, and he'd do that for Bri, because she needed him to.

God, that was messed up. He was messed up.

"I gotta go," he said quickly, just as Shaina started to speak. But she immediately jumped in before he could hang up.

"Oh, no, no, no, you don't. Not unless you want me to be on the first flight I can get to Seattle and come banging on your door in the middle of the night." Shaina paused, but he heard her blow out a breath. "Ash, what's going on? Talk to me. Please. Or if you won't or can't, please think about making another appointment with that therapist you were seeing. What's her name?"

Guilt and shame and a huge wave of sadness rippled outward from some central spot in his chest, and for several long seconds, he was unable to speak. Finally, he managed, "Please don't come, Shai."

"Ash—"

"Cass and I didn't have a date. I don't have time to date. I have to focus on Bri and taking care of her and passing my classes and getting into grad school. And that's it. Okay? I *am* fine. Or I *will be* fine. I just can't do any more than that right now. I don't have the time or the energy. And—and I . . ." He trailed off but let out a sigh.

She deserved the whole truth, even if it was a truth he had just figured out. Or just finally admitted to himself. He closed his eyes and reluctantly forced himself to finish.

"And I can't let myself be in a relationship with anyone anyway. I . . . I wouldn't be able to handle it if I lost another person I let myself care about."

Shaina answered almost immediately, her voice gentle and caring. "Oh, sweetie," she said, "you can't do that to yourself. You have to let yourself live, Ash. You have to give yourself the chance to be happy."

"Maybe I'll be happiest if I'm alone," he mumbled. "Just me and Bri. That's . . . the safest."

Ash opened his eyes, but he still saw Cass's kind expression and soft smile from only a few hours ago, and some warmth that felt comfortable and quiet and so very safe spread from his chest and outward, wrapping him up and blocking out all the bad.

"Ash . . ."

“I don’t know if I can handle it, Shai,” he said again, but even he could hear there was very little conviction in his voice now. “What if . . .”

“What if he’s exactly what you need? What if he’s as sweet and caring as he sounds? What if you give it a chance and see what happens?”

“He lives in California. Six hundred miles away,” Ash argued.

“Even better,” Shaina countered. “You can take your time getting to know each other. There won’t be so much pressure or time commitment. And you’ll both be busy with school, so he’ll understand on that front, too. *And* you said he was wonderful with Bri.”

“Oh, yeah. I think he adored her.” Ash pushed himself up to sit, glad he didn’t feel woozy anymore.

“That’s perfect. He’ll understand your commitment to her also.” Shaina paused, and her voice was gentle when she said, “He’s already a good friend, right?”

“Yeah. Very.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“So *maybe* give it a chance and see what happens. You deserve to be happy, Ash. And, not that I’ve been paying *that* much attention, but when you talk about him, you kinda sound different. In a good way. Like you’re . . .” She trailed off as though reluctant to say the next words. But Ash knew where she’d been going.

“Like I’m not as broken?”

“No. Like you’re actually happy,” Shaina corrected, her voice soft. “Like he’s already giving you something you’ve been needing for a long time.”

His chest tightened, but in a way that wasn’t uncomfortable. She was right. Again.

“It still wasn’t a date,” he said. “You won’t convince me otherwise.”

Shaina laughed lightly, the sound bringing a small smile to Ash’s lips. “Okay, okay. But maybe—”

“Maybe give me some time to process all of this?” he said. “And I don’t really know how Cass feels. Or if *he* wants a relationship. Or even if he’s single.”

“Isn’t he? You said he broke up with his boyfriend a while ago.”

“Yeah,” Ash said, “but that doesn’t mean there isn’t someone else now.” Slowly, he got his feet under himself and stood. The wobbly feeling from

earlier was gone. “In any case, I, um . . . I just need some time. Okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” Shaina said. She was quiet for a moment, then she added, “Just don’t forget that it’s okay for you to be happy or to try to find happiness. I know everything—*everything* has been so, so hard, and I know you’re still grieving. We’re all still grieving.”

“I think I always will be,” Ash said quietly.

“Probably.” Shaina’s voice wavered. “I miss her every day. Every single day, even still. I’m not sure that will ever go away. But you deserve to have happiness, to let yourself be happy, Ash. Just . . . don’t forget that.”

He nodded, though he knew she couldn’t see. “I’ll try.”

“Soooooo, now that all that heavy emotional stuff is out of the way, let me tell you about a date *I* had on Saturday.”

Ash muffled a laugh. “With that banker guy, Chad?”

“Yes. Ugh. Chad.”

Ash could almost *hear* her rolling her eyes, and he laughed again. She went on in great detail, describing what honestly sounded like the date from hell—not that Ash would really know—and he listened as he picked up where he’d left off a bit ago, clearing the dirty dishes from the coffee table. By the time she was done, he’d cleaned all the messes and nearly finished unloading the dishwasher.

He paused after setting the last of Bri’s sippy cups in the cupboard, and he turned around to rest his back on the counter and closed his eyes.

“I think I’m gonna head to bed,” he said. He was exhausted, and he had a lot to think about. And maybe he had a text to send. To Cass.

It was late, though; he should probably do that in the morning. After he spent some more time thinking.

“Yeah, me too.” Shaina sighed. “I love you, Ash.”

“Love you, too, Shai.” He pushed away from the counter and started toward the bedroom, flipping off the kitchen lights. “Tell your parents I said hi.”

Shaina laughed quietly. “Sure, but you know Mom’s going to ask if you’re coming down for Thanksgiving.”

“I know.”

“Are you?”

Ash sighed and paused in front of his bedroom door. “I don’t know,” he said, keeping his voice low to avoid waking Bri. “It’s so expensive to fly around the holidays. And I might be really busy with school. But I’ll try to

figure it out soon. Just let me get classes started and see how things are going, at least."

"Yeah, of course."

He smiled. "Good night, Shai. Thank you for calling."

"Anytime. Night."

He held the phone to his ear for another few seconds before lowering it and stuffing it in his pocket. Then he took a deep breath, switched off the lights in the hallway, and tiptoed into the bedroom and over to the dresser to find some pajamas to change into. He glanced at Bri's crib and could just make out the outline of her face from the dim light peeking in through the closed shutters. She was sleeping peacefully.

She was healthy and happy. Perfectly happy.

Tears stung at his eyes, and he quickly dug a pair of pajama pants and an old T-shirt out of the top drawer of his dresser and then turned and hurried back out of the room to shower and get ready for bed.

Bri really *was* perfectly happy.

And maybe Shaina was right. Maybe *he* deserved to be happy, too.

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*Brendan (Wednesday, September 21, 2022 – 7:04 a.m.):* Hey Joe said you're up in Seattle for a school thing. Thanks for telling me. Thought I was your best friend =P

*Brendan (7:05 a.m.):* When you get back, wanna hang out? Laurie's out of town this weekend

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# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Cass

"IT WASN'T A DATE, ma," Cass grumbled, his phone balanced between his shoulder and ear as he packed the last of his toiletries back into his overnight bag.

His mom laughed lightly, the wonderful sound bringing a smile to his lips.

"Well, whatever it was," she said, her voice slow but clear and steady, "I'm glad you had a good time. Ash seems like a nice man."

"He is." Cass closed his eyes. "He's a good friend. But that's all. Really."

Even though that was technically true, Cass's heart betrayed every word he said, stumbling and stuttering as a crisp, clear image of Ash's gorgeous blue eyes and gentle smile flitted through his mind. He let out a soft breath, barely a whisper of a sigh, hoping his mom didn't hear it.

She must have, though, because he heard another light laugh, and then she said in a teasing tone, "Sure, dear, whatever you have to tell yourself."

He snorted a laugh and collapsed onto the bed on his back. "Was that a joke, ma? Because it sounded like a joke."

He heard another quiet laugh from the other end of the line, though his mom didn't say anything else right away, and for a moment, a wave of deep homesickness dampened the joy he'd felt from his mom's tease. He hadn't been away from his mom for even a single night since she'd had her stroke, and although he'd been texting frequently with his dad to make sure she was doing fine, he missed her deeply. Her slew of health issues the last six months or so had been scary enough, especially back in July when she'd been hospitalized for several days, and he couldn't imagine how he'd feel if

anything bad happened while he was gone—even if his trip was only really about a day and a half long.

The text communications with his dad had been encouraging, though. His mom's mental acuity had improved substantially in the last few weeks, after her doctors had adjusted one of her medications for an entirely different reason. It had been nothing short of a miracle, and hearing her joke, tease, engage sometimes in a bit of silly banter back and forth with him or his dad had been uplifting in so many ways.

"I'll be home late tonight," he said, sitting up. "Are you going to be able to put up with Dad by yourself until then?"

Cass heard a grumble from somewhere in the background and muffled words that had to have been from his father.

"I should be okay," his mom said, a tease still in her voice. "In fact, maybe you should stay an extra day so you can go on another date."

"Ma!" Cass laughed as he stood up from the bed. "Ah, I should probably get going. You have a good day, okay? And I'll see you tonight."

"I love you, Caspian."

He smiled softly. "Love you, too, ma."

"Oh, wait, your dad needs to talk to you," she said, and there was some rustling on the other end before Cass's dad cleared his throat.

"We have to get going here," his dad said.

"Yeah, me too." Cass shouldered his overnight bag as he looked around the hotel room, scanning for anything he'd missed. He probably should have left a few minutes ago, considering he needed to be on campus in twenty minutes and he was only somewhat confident he knew where he was going.

"Your plane still getting in at eight?" his dad asked. "Do you have a ride?"

"Yeah, Joe said he could pick me up. I should be home around eight thirty or so. But don't wait up for me if Mom's tired, of course."

"Yeah, yeah."

"And let me know how her appointment goes?"

"Sure. I'll text you."

"Thanks, Dad."

"See you tonight. Hmm—" His dad said something that Cass couldn't quite hear, like he'd pulled the phone away from his ear. Then there was a short laugh, and he cleared his throat. "Ah, so, your mom wants to know if the weather is nice?"

Cass narrowed his eyes but then glanced out the window. The sky was bright blue, the sun shining. “Uh, looks like it,” he said, adding, “I don’t think there’s any rain in the forecast.”

There was another pause where he heard his dad’s muffled voice talking to his mom, followed by a low chuckle. “So then she says to tell you that a picnic in a park is a really great idea for a second date.”

Cass’s cheeks heated up, and he shook his head. “It wasn’t a date, Dad!”

“Hey, now, don’t yell at me, I’m just the messenger.” His dad was full-on laughing now, which Cass honestly wasn’t sure he’d heard in a really long time.

Another pang of homesickness hit him, and Cass swallowed and closed his eyes. “Give Mom a hug for me?”

“Yeah, sure. Have a good day, kiddo.”

“You, too. Talk to you tonight, Dad.”

Cass hung up his phone with a sigh and grimaced when he saw the time in the top right corner of the screen. Only fifteen minutes until nine. He was going to be late, even if he hurried. After one last look around the room, he headed out, phone in hand. He stopped briefly at the hotel’s front desk to drop off his keys and grab a bottle of water, then he exited through the front double doors of the hotel.

Brightness and warm sunlight hit him, and something about it was immediately energizing. He turned to his right and started walking briskly, tapping on his phone screen to open up his navigation app. He sort of knew where he was going and what route to take to get there, but the last thing he wanted was to be late because he’d made a wrong turn.

The streets were busy, and for the first half of his walk, he found himself weaving around other pedestrians and being careful to avoid getting hit by bicyclists and vehicles every time he had to cross at an intersection. However, when he turned off 45th Street onto Memorial Way, heading straight into the heart of the University of Washington campus, the entire vibe changed. The tree-lined sidewalks took him on a shaded path past dorms, lecture halls, and research buildings, and even though it wasn’t really “quiet” by definition—there were still cars and buses driving past him on the street, bicyclists peddling by, and other pedestrians walking along ahead of and behind him—he found himself feeling less hurried, the worries he carried with him all the time feeling slightly less burdensome.

He reached Kane Hall at five minutes before nine according to the time on his phone, and he paused right outside the entrance to the huge brick

building, shifting his bag on his shoulder.

Grad school orientation.

For a while after his mom's stroke, he honestly hadn't been sure he'd ever get here. He'd had plans when he was at UC Davis; he'd been accepted to their master's program in art history, with his future career as an archivist all mapped out. But then his dad had called him in the middle of the night from the emergency room at Shasta Regional Medical Center, and everything had changed. He'd still managed to finish his degree, commuting the two and a half hours back and forth from Redding to Davis to attend classes, and then he'd initially just deferred for a year, assuming—and desperately hoping—his mom would recover enough for him to leave again.

That hadn't happened, and it had become clear very quickly that his family needed him home. He'd withdrawn his commitment to grad school altogether and started occasional and irregular volunteer work at the local library as a way to give himself something to do outside of taking care of his mom. When Mr. Peterson at the library had suggested he look into an online degree program, Cass had jumped at the chance.

And now, here he was.

The future still wasn't clear to him; the MLIS degree wouldn't mean anything at all if he couldn't work because he had to stay home and take care of his mom. But it felt like something he needed to do *for himself*, and he was happy that both of his parents seemed to understand and support that.

With a deep breath, he started forward, slipping his phone into his pocket and tightening his hand on the strap of his overnight bag. Another student held the door open ahead of him, and he thanked them with a nod and walked with them to the room where the orientation was being held.

Each step seemed to give him a bit more energy, and as he slid into an aisle seat near the middle of the room a few minutes later, he pulled out his phone to text his dad.

*Cass (8:59 a.m.):* I'm here on campus, and they're about to start. My phone will be on silent, but I'll check it often if you need to get a hold of me

*Cass (9:00 a.m.):* Tell mom I love her and miss her. See you both tonight :)

At the front of the lecture hall, an older woman dressed in a flowing floral skirt and a white blouse stepped up to the podium. Cass quickly muted all sound on his phone and started to slip it back in his pocket when the screen lit up with a text message notification.

The second he saw Ash's name, his heart skipped a beat, and he held the phone low in his lap so he could read the short messages as the woman at the front started addressing the room.

*Ash (9:01 a.m.):* I had a great time last night. Thanks for hanging out with us :)

*Ash (9:01 a.m.):* Hope today goes well!

He bit his lip to rein in his smile.

*Cass (9:01 a.m.):* Thanks! Just getting started now

And, because he couldn't hold back, he sent a second text too.

*Cass (9:02 a.m.):* I also had a great time last night. I'd love to do it again sometime

It was an invitation he knew he really shouldn't extend, and not because he didn't think they should hang out as just friends but because he very, very much intended the invitation to be for something more than just friends.

Unfortunately, he had no way of knowing whether Ash would interpret the message that way or not.

No response came right away, and when the woman at the front began to go over the schedule for the day, Cass quickly blacked out his screen, shoved the phone deep into his pocket, and tried his best to pay attention, even as his chest was buzzing with eagerness.



THE FIRST HALF OF the day was busy, full of informational sessions conducted by various faculty members from the department, followed by smaller breakout sessions run by second- and third-year grad students in the MLIS program. The energy remained upbeat and positive, and by the time their lunch break rolled around at twelve thirty, Cass was fully immersed. He

joined three other students and headed out across campus to grab a bite to eat at the food court inside the student union building.

After they settled at a table with their lunches, Cass finally pulled his phone out of his pocket for the first time since that morning. He had a slew of notifications, and he swiped through them quickly while the group around him started to chat about how the day was going.

The first message was a simple “all is well” text from his dad, sent about an hour ago. Cass responded with a thumbs-up emoji, then scrolled through a few other messages—one from Brendan, another from Joe.

Ash hadn’t replied, which really shouldn’t have affected him as much as it did.

He was just about to put his phone away when the screen lit up with another new notification. Frowning, he glanced back down at the screen, and his stomach dropped.

The notification was a text message from the airline. His flight this afternoon was delayed more than two hours. No reason was given. His new departure time was eight fifteen, which was close to his prior arrival time; that meant he wouldn’t be getting back to Redding until after 10:00 p.m.

He stared at the notification for several seconds, trying to figure out how he should be feeling about it. Because the first thing that popped into his head was the fleeting thought that maybe now he’d have enough time to meet up with Ash again *today*, if Ash was available.

And that wasn’t what he expected should have been his first thought.

It should have been worry about getting home to his mom, then more worry about having to inconvenience Joe with the later pickup time, and then even more worry about having to reschedule the rideshare he’d already booked to take him to the airport that afternoon.

Once he’d worried about all of that, only *then* should he be considering whether to send Ash another text to see if they could meet again.

Instead, he found himself screenshotting the text from the airline, sending that screenshot to Ash, and then following it up with a short message of his own.

*Cass (12:47 p.m.):* Looks like I’ll be in town a couple extra hours. Wanna hang out again, maybe have an early dinner or something? My treat this time ;) I’ll be done here around 4

He bit his lower lip and stared at the phone. That didn’t sound too much like he was asking Ash on a date. Did it?

Groaning inwardly, he clicked back out of the text chain with Ash. Then he quickly sent an apologetic text to Joe, attaching the same screenshot showing his delayed flight time and new expected arrival time. Joe immediately texted back with a thumbs-up, followed by a message that said it was no problem, he'd see Cass around ten. He sent a similar text to his dad, though his dad didn't respond right away. And when all of that was done, he finally set his phone face down on the table and made himself take a few bites of his lunch, though most of his appetite was gone.

The other students around him were still chatting and eating, and he managed to jump into the conversation, which had somehow turned to the preservation of ancient artifacts and scrolls. His stomach was in knots, though, and he kept turning his phone over every few minutes, hoping to see a response from Ash.

Just after one o'clock, the group cleaned up and started back across campus for the second part of the orientation. Cass followed, now deep in conversation with one of the other students, and it wasn't until he sat back down in the lecture hall a few minutes later that he looked at his phone again.

He tensed as he saw a string of multiple messages pop up, and he quickly opened his messaging app and started reading.

*Ash (1:09 p.m.):* Hey, sorry, Bri and I were out hiking

*Ash (1:09 p.m.):* Tiger Mountain in Issaquah (to the southeast), take a look

Under the text was a selfie of Ash with Bri up on his shoulders. They stood at what looked like the peak of a heavily forested mountain, miles and miles of wilderness stretching down and out behind them. Bri was giggling, both of her hands on top of Ash's head, and Ash's smile was broad and beautiful and full, his eyes lit up to almost match the color of the sky.

Cass let out a shallow breath and kept reading down the text string.

*Ash (1:11 p.m.):* Sorry your flight is delayed

*Ash (1:11 p.m.):* We can be free this afternoon :)

*Ash (1:11 p.m.):* Did you have anything specific in mind?

*Ash (1:14 p.m.):* There's a café and a little park on the north side of Portage Bay, about a mile from campus, might be a good spot? The café is Mexican food, tacos, burritos

*Ash (1:14 p.m.):* How about we pick you up from campus at 4, and after, we can drive you to the airport?

Something about the progression of Ash's texts felt almost cautiously hopeful to Cass. He glanced up toward the front of the room, where several faculty members were congregating, getting ready to start the second part of the day. Then he looked back down at his phone and scrolled to the picture Ash had sent. And he let himself stare again.

Ash's sparkling blue eyes, broad smile, and flushed cheeks sent some pleasant warmth through Cass's chest, and for a second, he felt almost breathless.

The thought briefly crossed his mind that Ash could've sent just a photo of the view from the top of the mountain. He hadn't *had* to send a selfie.

But, god, Cass was sure glad he had.

Blinking, Cass scrolled back to the bottom of the text chain. He closed his eyes for a second, then typed a short message in response, unsure whether he hoped Ash understood the underlying meaning.

*Cass (1:21 p.m.):* Incredible view

He took a deep breath and then responded to the rest of Ash's texts.

*Cass (1:21 p.m.):* I didn't have anything specific in mind. The café and park sound perfect. And the drive to the airport would be really great, if it's not too much trouble

*Cass (1:22 p.m.):* I'm at Kane Hall, done at 4

*Ash (1:23 p.m.):* Great

*Ash (1:23 p.m.):* About to start driving back from Issaquah. We'll see you at 4. There's a little roundabout just outside Kane Hall, I'll pick you up there :)

Up at the front of the room, the dean of the Information School stepped up to the podium, introduced himself again, and started talking about what they would be doing for the rest of the afternoon.

Cass glanced back down at his phone and responded with a thumbs-up emoji and a quick “looking forward to it!” Then he stuffed his phone back in his pocket, and for the next two hours and thirty-seven minutes, he tried his best to pay attention.

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*Grant (Wednesday, September 21, 2022 – 2:47 p.m.):* Yo, what's your class schedule again? We should get together next week on campus. Text me back, dude!

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# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Ash

BRI DIDN'T NAP ON the drive home from the trailhead in Issaquah. She babbled the whole way, talking to Ollie the Octopus and playing with her toys. When they got home, she *still* didn't nap. She took a bath and had an afternoon snack, then insisted Ash read one of her favorite books to her.

By the time three thirty rolled around, when they were supposed to be getting ready to leave so they could meet Cass at four, Bri was just *finally* starting to look droopy-eyed. Ash plopped her down in her crib, raced through a short shower to get all the sweat and dirt from their earlier hike off, and then took a few minutes to get dressed and style his hair.

As he cycled through a few different shirts before deciding on a plain medium-gray tech shirt that fit him particularly well, he could almost hear Shaina's voice. *"So, it's not a date, huh? Whyyyyyyy the obsession with your clothes then?"*

*Because I just want to look nice* wouldn't be a sufficient answer for her. She'd insist it was more than that.

And honestly, Ash wasn't really sure if she'd be right or wrong.

He'd had to talk himself into even texting Cass in the first place this morning, and he hadn't had the courage to say anything other than a sort of generic *I had a good time*. Cass's text back, however, had given him plenty to think about on his multi-hour hike with Bri up and down Tiger Mountain.

The only conclusion he'd reached, even after over five miles up and down a mountain while carrying a baby on his shoulders much of the time, was one he already knew to be true: He did like Cass. He liked Cass a whole lot.

But by the time they'd gotten back to his car at the trailhead and he'd strapped Bri into her car seat and seen Cass's next messages about his flight delay, Ash had run around in circles in his head so long, he hadn't known what to say to Cass's invitation to meet up again.

So he'd just started typing.

And now, it seemed, they had another ambiguous not-a-date.

Only this time, he *knew* about the ambiguity. That had to be why his stomach was all twisted in knots.

When he was finally satisfied with his hair and his clothes, he turned to Bri's crib. She was standing there watching him, clutching her stuffie. Her eyes were still sleepy, but she hadn't slept at all, which didn't really bode well for the rest of the afternoon.

"Un-ca Ashhhh," she said, dropping Ollie the Octopus and lifting both arms up to him.

"Aw, sweet girl, are you tired?" He picked her up out of her crib, and she immediately rested her head on his shoulder. "We're gonna go on a car ride and see Cass again. Do you remember Cass from yesterday?"

She didn't answer, and so he just kissed the top of her head, grabbed her stuffie from the crib, and carried her out into the living room.

"Now where did we put your shoes?" he hummed quietly as he made his way around the small room, searching for any sign of her tiny blue sneakers.

"Da, da," Bri mumbled weakly, pointing toward the couch.

"Oh, do you see them?"

"Da." Bri squirmed a little, and Ash set her down lightly on the carpet. She toddled over, reached under the end of the couch, and pulled out a pair of shoes. "Da!" she declared, only with slightly more energy than before.

"Ah, you found them! Great job!" Ash sat on the floor with her and helped her put them on. Then she crawled up into his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and rested her head on his shoulder again. "Tired baby, huh?"

She didn't answer. He slipped his arm under her and stood, cradling her carefully. Then he grabbed the diaper bag from where it sat next to the front door, and they left, heading out to the elevator and then down to the parking garage. By the time he had strapped her into her car seat, she was out, her eyes closed softly and her head slumped.

Ash gently brushed her hair back and then kissed her forehead before making his way around to the driver's side and climbing in. From his pocket,

his phone chimed quietly with a notification just as he pushed the button to start the engine.

*Cass (3:50 p.m.):* All done here and heading outside. See you in a few?

*Ash (3:50 p.m.):* Leaving my apartment now, should be less than ten minutes :)

*Cass (3:50 p.m.):* Perfect

The drive was short, since Ash somehow managed to avoid hitting any red lights on the way, and he pulled into the roundabout near Kane Hall just about eight minutes later. Cass stood at the curb on the far side, and as soon as their eyes locked, a warm sort of eagerness fluttered in Ash's chest.

God, the man was handsome.

His dark-wash jeans fit perfectly, hugging his narrow hips, and the sleeves of his olive-green button-down were rolled up to his elbows, showing off strong forearms. His short dark hair looked naturally neat, like the most he'd done with it was sweep it back off his forehead some time ago, and the days-old stubble covering his jaw only made him even more attractive.

Then Cass grinned, and every little bit of apprehension that had been flitting about in Ash's mind quieted.

Ash exhaled a short breath and smiled back, taking one hand off the wheel long enough to wave a greeting. He slowed his car and then stopped along the curb.

Cass opened the front passenger side door and hopped in, setting a duffle bag on the floor at his feet. "Hey, thanks for—"

Ash shook his head, cutting Cass off, and then he tilted his head toward the back seat. "Bri's sleeping," he said quietly. "Sorry, she didn't nap after our hike earlier and just passed out a few minutes ago."

"Ahhh." Cass closed the door carefully and then glanced into the back. "Precious girl," he said, his voice low. "She must have been exhausted. How long was the hike?"

"About five miles out and back. I carried her most of the way, but she did quite a bit of walking, too." Ash swallowed hard as he pulled back onto the road. His body buzzed, as though now acutely aware of how close Cass was. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

Next to him, Cass hummed. “Five miles, wow. You must be exhausted, too, then? Carrying her most of the way?”

“Ah, nah, not exhausted. But it is a good workout,” Ash admitted.

Cass laughed softly. “I’ll bet. How high up is the summit?”

They continued chatting in hushed tones to avoid waking Bri while Ash navigated south toward the café, which sat right on the bank of Portage Bay. Everything seemed much less awkward than the day before, although Ash’s heart rate ticked up every time he glanced over at Cass and their eyes met.

When he pulled into an open spot in the dirt parking lot across the street from the café a few minutes later and cut the engine, he took a deep breath and then turned to look into the back seat over his shoulder.

“Still out?” Cass asked softly.

“Yup,” Ash said. He glanced back at Cass with a grin. “We don’t need to be too quiet anymore. She’ll be out for at least an hour, no matter what we do.”

Cass’s eyes widened slightly, and a pink tinge grew in his cheeks, though it took Ash another few seconds to realize how his words could be interpreted.

And the fact that Cass had somehow interpreted them that way . . .

With a sharp breath, Ash quickly tore his gaze away from Cass’s.

“Uh, let’s go, yeah?” he said, his face heating up. Without waiting for a response, Ash unfastened his seat belt and nearly jumped out of the car. He shut the driver’s side door and then headed around to the back of the small SUV and popped open the hatch to get Bri’s stroller. By the time he had it unfolded and shut the hatch, Cass was just closing his door.

Ash paused, staring as Cass’s eyes met his again. Their deep brown looked the same as the day they’d met. Ash wasn’t even really sure why he remembered that moment so well—the moment when Cass had come up to his car door, a soft, inviting smile on his face, and offered Ash help getting his car unstuck. The gentle kindness and understanding in Cass’s eyes were the same now as they had been then, and it made Ash feel safe in a way he really couldn’t define.

Exhaling a slow breath, Ash pushed the stroller forward a tad. “The car seat detaches from the car and fits in here, so we don’t have to carry her around the whole time,” he explained with a tight smile.

Cass just nodded and shuffled out of the way as Ash opened up the door to the back seat and carefully lifted Bri’s car seat out. He clicked it into place

in the stroller, then extended the canopy out to block much of the sun. Bri sighed deeply in her sleep but didn't wake.

"She really is out," Cass said softly once Bri was all settled.

Ash nodded. "Yeah. Normally, she'd have napped on the way home from the hike, but she was too into whatever conversation she was having with her stuffie, which—" Ash groaned and stepped back over to the car. "Which we'd better have with us in case she *does* wake up, or you'll find out just how loud she can cry." He leaned in across the seat and grabbed the bright-blue octopus stuffie along with Bri's diaper bag. When he straightened back up, shaking his head, Cass was grinning at him, and he stopped again, letting himself feel whatever that sense of comfort was that he got from Cass's gaze.

He shook his head and looked down after a moment. He almost wanted to say something, to ask Cass how he did that—how he made Ash feel so good. But he didn't have the courage quite yet.

"Here, let me carry that for you?" Cass asked, and when Ash lifted his eyes again, Cass was slowly reaching out.

It took Ash a second to realize Cass was offering to take the diaper bag, and he shook his head. "Ah, thanks, but it can go under the stroller."

"Oh, right."

Cass moved out of the way again as Ash slid the diaper bag into the space on the bottom of the stroller. Ash then gently set the octopus stuffie in Bri's lap, so it'd be there if Bri woke up.

"There, now we're good to go." Ash took his place behind the stroller. "Hungry?"

Cass nodded. "Lead the way."

Something about that made Ash grin, and he got stuck yet again, his eyes locked on Cass's for an extra half second. More of that pleasant warmth wrapped around him as Cass gifted him another smile. Ash still didn't look away, but he felt his cheeks flush, and a deep longing surged through him. Again, he found himself wanting to say something, wanting to ask if Cass was feeling this, too, or if it was just him being ridiculous. And for the first time—ever, actually—he wished for something he'd never had. Closeness. Something more intimate in intention. A hug that meant something. A kiss. An arm around his shoulders.

He opened his mouth, almost ready to speak up, but he couldn't. Instead, he just gave a short laugh and tilted his head toward the café. "This way," he said, and he finally started off, pushing the stroller over the rough dirt and gravel to the sidewalk.

Cass followed along next to him as they crossed the narrow street together, then held open the door to the tiny café for Ash to enter.

A few minutes later, they were settled at a two-seater table on the outdoor patio, under the shade of a bright-orange umbrella, sipping their drinks and waiting for their food to arrive. Bri still slept quietly in her stroller next to them, not making so much as a peep.

A pleasant, soft breeze swept in off the water, cutting into the heat of the day, and Ash sighed and leaned back in his chair. Across the table, Cass took a sip of his iced tea and looked out over the small marina next to them.

"It's so nice here. Do you come a lot?" he asked.

Ash shook his head. "Not too often. Honestly, Bri and I eat at home most of the time. I used to come here more, though. My friend Grant goes kayaking a lot, and he used to always drag me along with him."

"Oh, you can rent them here? I've never gone."

"Yeah. It's fun." Ash leaned forward to rest his elbows on the table, holding back the urge to say they should try it together sometime. Cass would be on his way home to California in just a few hours now, and he'd have no real reason to come back. The thought made Ash's stomach drop, and he picked up his glass of water to distract himself.

"So, how did today go?" he asked.

Cass's smile lit back up, and he set down his drink and leaned back in his chair. "Pretty good, actually," he started. He opened his mouth to keep going but then shut it and shook his head. "How much detail do you want? Because I'm actually much more excited about it all than I was even yesterday, and I could probably go on and on for quite a while if you let me. But I don't want to bore you."

Ash laughed and sat up straighter. "As much detail as you want to share. You won't bore me at all, I promise." He tilted his head toward Bri's stroller. "Remember, most of the conversations I have right now consist of one- or two-syllable words that are only understandable because I've learned to translate 'Bri speak.'"

"Alright, alright." Cass gave Ash a soft smile and then started recounting the last few hours, talking animatedly as he told Ash *all* the details, including more personal things. Like the fact that even though he was starting on what should be a pretty solid career path, he wasn't really sure what was in his future since he didn't foresee a time when he wouldn't need to be home to take care of his mom. There was a flicker of sadness or maybe uncertainty in Cass's eyes when he said that, but he quickly moved on to a new topic—how

beautiful the University of Washington campus was, even just the small part of it that he'd seen. Ash had to agree with that; he absolutely loved the campus, which was one of the reasons he hadn't left with his sister and the Wallers to move down to California.

Their food arrived shortly after, and the conversation continued while they ate, jumping easily and organically from topic to topic. Bri slept soundly the whole time, her stuffie still sitting dutifully in her lap.

When the check came a good hour later, Cass quickly reached out and picked it up before Ash could.

"My treat, remember?" he said, grinning almost triumphantly.

Ash's cheeks heated up. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

Cass gave a weak shrug but also didn't look away for several seconds. His eyes seemed to see right through whatever walls Ash was trying to put up, and a sudden, deep ache for more of that connection settled in Ash's chest. He looked down quickly, his heart thrumming.

There was a pause, and then Cass cleared his throat. "You said there's a park nearby? Is it stroller-friendly?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," Ash managed, though his words stuck in his throat. He forced himself to look back up, though he couldn't quite hold Cass's gaze this time. "It's just over there." He tipped his head to his right, over toward Fritz Hedges Waterway Park. "It's not big, just like a short strip along the water, but I love the view."

"Let's do it, then." Cass leaned forward, pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, and then counted out a few twenties and stuck them inside the check holder. "Ready?"

"Yeah."

Ash stood slowly, pushed his chair in, and took a moment to check on Bri, who was *still* out cold. Then he followed Cass back out of the café, pushing the stroller ahead of him. Once they were out on the sidewalk, Cass moved into place beside him, and they walked the short way to the park in silence. The path curved toward the water, a small grassy knoll on one side and a shallow, gravel-covered shore on the other. A couple of kayakers were just returning, their boats sliding up onto the shore as they hopped out, and a woman was playing fetch with a sopping-wet golden retriever, who bounded in and out of the water gleefully every time the woman threw the dog's ball.

They continued on the brief walk through the park, then looped back to a short pier that ran out over the water at the park's south end. Ash stopped Bri's stroller right along the railing and glanced over at Cass, who stood back

a few feet staring out at the water, his hands shoved into his pockets. A slight breeze ruffled Cass's hair, and Ash's heart stuttered.

God, what was wrong with him?

He looked away again and stepped around the stroller to the railing. Cass moved up beside him, far enough away that they weren't touching but still close enough that Ash could feel it. He swallowed hard as that deep ache came again. This time, it was heavier, and the longing was specific, like it had been outside of his car.

An arm around his shoulders.

A kiss to his temple.

A hug that lingered and didn't let go.

He exhaled a shaky breath.

"I, uh, I told you it was a small park," he said with a weak laugh. Maybe if they could start up a conversation again, he'd get out of his head.

"You did," Cass said, also laughing softly. "I think it's nice, though. Peaceful."

"Yeah," Ash agreed.

He kept his eyes trained straight ahead, out onto the water, watching the surface reflect the sunlight overhead as ripples moved toward the shore. Next to him, he heard Cass let out a quiet huff, and he glanced over. Cass's hands were clasped together in front of him, and he was shaking his head slightly.

"What?"

Cass straightened up a bit, shifting his hands so they were both gripping the railing. Then he lifted a hand and raked it through his hair. "Ah, it's nothing really."

Ash's eyes narrowed, and he chuckled. "Well, now you have to tell me."

This time, Cass actually frowned, and he turned to rest his back against the railing, his eyes downcast. For another long moment, he was silent, and then he stuffed his hands in his pockets.

"I have something I want to ask you," Cass said quietly. "I keep trying to get up the courage to do it, but then I talk myself out of it. And since we have to go soon, I need to do it now, or I don't get to."

Ash tightened his grip on the railing, and as Cass lifted his eyes slowly, Ash's stomach swooped. The intention in Cass's expression was perfectly clear, even from where Ash was standing, with zero real experience interpreting such expressions.

"What do you want to ask?" His voice sounded rough to his own ears, but he managed not to look away this time.

Cass pursed his lips and hesitated, his cheeks tinged slightly pink. Ash inhaled slowly, waiting.

“I wanted to ask if, um . . .” Cass closed his eyes and blew out a breath. “If next time,” he continued, “I can take you out. On a date, I mean. If I can take you out on a date. Next time we’re together in person, that is.”

Ash’s first thought was how incredibly adorable Cass was when he was nervous. His tentative smile, the hope in his eyes, the way he bit his lower lip. Ash’s stomach swooped again, and he blinked and dropped his eyes to the ground.

“Um . . .”

He turned to look out over the water, his next thought bombarding him with a slew of expletives and a whole lot of confusion.

He’d been expecting the question. Hadn’t he? He should have been prepared. Ready for it. Certain and confident as he told Cass *“Yes, I’d love to. That sounds great.”*

That was, after all, what he *wanted* to say. But he found himself shaking his head instead, his eyes screwed shut against the dull ache in his chest. He leaned out over the railing more.

“Um . . .”

A gentle hand settled on his shoulder and squeezed, and he let out a soft breath and dropped his chin. For just a moment, he allowed himself to feel it. He leaned into Cass’s touch, and it was as soft and welcoming as he’d expected it to be.

Quietly, Cass pulled back his hand and stepped up next to Ash along the railing, close enough this time that their shoulders touched. That was good, too.

“You don’t have to answer now,” Cass said gently. “And I realize that I have no idea *when* that would actually be—when we’ll be together again in person.”

Ash huffed another weak laugh. “True.”

“I’ve just really had a great time getting to know you,” Cass said. His voice softened even more as he added, “And I’d really like the chance to get to know you more.”

Ash closed his eyes and nodded. That wasn’t his answer; he wasn’t ready to answer yet, even if his body was screaming at him for more of this closeness Cass was offering. But it was an admission of *something*.

And somehow, Cass didn’t question it.

They stood there like that for another few minutes, quietly gazing out over the bay as the sun began to drop lower in the sky. Then Cass cleared his throat.

“Time to go, I think?”

“Ah, yeah, maybe.” Ash straightened up and reached into his pocket for his phone. The screen lit up, and he grimaced. “Yeah, it’s just after five thirty. We should go so you’re not late.”

“I’m totally going to take it as a good sign that you sound disappointed,” Cass said, a clear tease in his tone and an adorably hopeful, silly half smile on his lips.

The levity and Cass’s optimism were contagious, and Ash feigned a nonchalant shrug, holding back a grin. “Maybe I am. Just a little.”

Cass’s eyebrows arched. “Just a little?”

“A teensy-weensy bit,” Ash corrected, holding up his fingers and pinching them together.

Cass laughed. “Alright, alright. I’ll take it.” He stepped over to the stroller and leaned down as though to check on Bri. “I can’t believe she slept this whole time.”

“I can,” Ash said. “She woke up at five this morning, wouldn’t go back to sleep, and then didn’t nap after that hike.”

Cass moved behind the stroller and started to set his hands on the handle but then paused. “Can I?” he asked.

Ash nodded, and he walked next to Cass as Cass pushed the stroller back up the pier and then down the sidewalk and across the street. Ash managed to move Bri’s car seat back into the car without waking her, while Cass folded the stroller and loaded it up in the cargo area.

A minute later, they were on the road, headed south toward SeaTac. There was traffic, predictably, but Ash almost found himself thankful for it, because it gave them a bit more time together. They talked quietly about nothing of much importance, and when they exited I-5 just after Tukwila, Bri finally woke up, gifting them with a wail she kindly muffled into her stuffie. Cass talked with her, doing a wonderful job pretending like he understood her cranky babbling, and by the time Ash pulled his SUV up along the curb under one of the Alaska Airlines signs in the drop-off section of the airport terminal, Bri was giggling and happy, munching on some yogurt snacks Cass had wrangled out of the diaper bag.

Ash shifted into park, and Cass unfastened his seat belt, opened the door, and climbed out, shouldering his bag. Then he leaned back in, setting one

hand on the roof of the car.

“I really did have a great time,” he said with a gentle smile. “Thank you, Ash.”

There was so much hope in Cass’s eyes that Ash couldn’t look away. He nodded instead.

“I did too,” he said. He bit his lower lip, still holding Cass’s gaze. “And, um . . . I’ll text you.”

Cass’s smile widened, and he nodded. “Good, good.” He hesitated for a second, as though he couldn’t stand the thought of leaving. Then he blinked and tore his gaze away from Ash, leaning into the car a little more. “Bye, Bri! It was so great to see you again!”

“Bye-bye! Bye-bye!” Bri squealed.

Ash laughed, and Cass grinned. Then he straightened up.

“Bye, Ash.”

Ash swallowed back the lump in his throat. “Bye, Cass.”

Cass stepped back, shut the car door, and gave a little wave, which somehow still had a hopeful optimism to it. Ash waved back, and then Cass turned and headed into the airport.

“Bye-bye!” Bri said again. “Cass, bye-bye!”

“Yeah, Cass is going bye-bye,” Ash said, and although he was still smiling, he could already feel an emptiness in his chest.

“Cass, bye-bye! Cass, bye-bye!”

He shifted the car out of park, put on his blinker, and pulled away from the curb, very, very close to making a decision he hoped he wouldn’t regret.

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*Joe (Wednesday, September 21, 2022 – 10:01 p.m.):* Leaving now. See you in fifteen

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# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Cass

ABOUT A HALF HOUR or so after his plane had landed at Redding Regional Airport, Cass quietly unlocked the front door to his parents' house, turned and waved a goodbye to Joe, and then tiptoed inside and closed the door behind him. After slipping off his shoes and stashing them under the table in the entryway, Cass padded down the hallway to his bedroom, his bag slung over his shoulder.

He paused outside of his room, listening until he clearly heard the rhythmic sound of his dad's snoring from his parents' bedroom farther down the hall. He'd expected them to be asleep, so that wasn't a surprise, but his stomach twisted with worry, nonetheless.

He'd have to wait until morning to see his mom. And after being away for a day and a half, that made him even more uneasy.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and quickly scrolled to his dad's last text message, sent right before nine.

> *Dad (8:56 p.m.):* Getting your mom into bed now. She's doing okay but tired today

> *Dad (8:57 p.m.):* Hope your flight is smooth. Love you. See you in the morning

He could read between the lines, and he knew his mom very well. His absence—and likely the minor delay in his flight departure time—had caused

her extra unneeded stress, and that was probably why she was more tired than normal.

Not that he regretted the trip. Quite the opposite, in fact. He was grateful he'd taken the opportunity for multiple reasons. It had been fantastic to be able to meet the professors who'd be teaching his classes, speak with the other students, and get a more in-depth introduction to the program.

And then, of course, he'd gotten to meet up with Ash, not once but twice . . .

He'd take the whole trip again in a heartbeat if it meant getting to spend more time with Ash.

But part of him had started to wonder if it had really been worth it and what his future held.

He'd worked up the courage to ask Ash out—at some uncertain, as-of-yet-unknown time in the future. But what if that future could never happen because he couldn't travel without causing his mom worry and stress? Could he do it again? Knowingly upset his mom . . . just to make himself happy?

Ash hadn't even said yes yet, and so all of Cass's worry and speculation might not even matter one bit if Ash wasn't interested.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Cass pushed open the door to his bedroom and went inside. He didn't bother flipping on the light, and instead, he just dropped his overnight bag on the floor by his closet, stripped down to his briefs, and collapsed into bed on his back.

He had to get up early; his dad would be leaving for work around seven, and he needed to be up to check in with him before then, maybe make his dad breakfast as a thank you for letting Cass go to Seattle. Yet he didn't feel like sleep was going to be happening anytime soon. His mind was too jumpy, his heart fretting and unsettled.

Groaning, he turned onto his stomach and propped himself up on his elbows, then opened up his phone and clicked back to his last message to Ash.

> *Cass (10:16 p.m.):* Plane just touched down. You'd laugh at the size of this airport. Two minutes and I'll be outside at the front ;)

There was still no response, and maybe if he wasn't already in a strange mood, he wouldn't think too much of it. Because Ash was probably sleeping. Or busy.

But it was also completely possible Cass had made things too awkward earlier and so Ash didn't know how to respond. Or wasn't ever going to

respond.

He set his phone down on the bed next to him and buried his head in his pillow, trying to let his mind settle so he could sleep.

Nothing happened.

Except that his brain kept replaying moments from the day. Good ones. Ones that had made him feel hopeful and seen and like maybe, probably, Ash might have feelings for him, too. There had been a bunch of those. Little moments where their eyes had met or Ash's expression had changed or his smile had shifted into something different. And that moment out on the pier when Ash had leaned into Cass's shoulder.

He still *felt* that one.

A warmth rippled through him, deep and sure, just as it had on the pier, and he groaned again and rolled over onto his back.

He gave in, knowing he wouldn't be sleeping for a while, and he picked his phone back up. Joe had texted, and so he took a moment to respond with another *thank you*. Then he wasted time playing some mindless word game until he nearly dropped the phone on his face when he started nodding off.

He'd just scooted over to set his phone on the nightstand so he could finally try to sleep when it buzzed with an incoming text message notification. Ash's name popped up on the screen, and Cass's heart slammed to a stop in his chest.

*Ash (11:47 p.m.):* Yes

He sat up slowly and scooted over until his back was against the wall.

*Cass (11:48 p.m.):* Yes, you'd laugh at the size of the airport?

*Ash (11:48 p.m.):* no

*Ash (11:48 p.m.):* sorry

*Ash (11:48 p.m.):* I mean maybe I would

*Ash (11:48 p.m.):* yes is my answer

*Ash (11:48 p.m.):* to you question from earlier

*Ash (11:48 p.m.):* at the pier

Cass closed his eyes and took a breath, trying to rein in the sudden elation that coursed through him. He took another breath, slower this time, and then shook his head, grinning, as he typed back a short message.

*Cass (11:49 p.m.):* Can I call you?

*Ash (11:50 p.m.):* yeah

*Ash (11:50 p.m.):* although if you can't tell, I'm a bit of a mess right now

Cass frowned and hesitated, reading Ash's text twice.

*Cass (11:51 p.m.):* Would you prefer to just text?

*Ash (11:51 p.m.):* no

Not more than two seconds after the text came through, Cass's phone began vibrating with an incoming call. He quickly swiped to answer and shifted the phone up to his ear.

"Hey."

"Hey." Ash's shaky voice came through the phone speaker as barely more than a whisper, but he quickly cleared his throat and then said, a little louder, "Um, so, how was your flight? Good to be home?"

Cass almost laughed, since the flight was the very last thing he wanted to talk about right then. But he could sense that Ash's nervousness, wherever it was coming from, was quite real. So instead, he settled back against the wall, smiling softly.

"It was smooth, for the most part, just a little turbulence on the landing," he said. "The plane was pretty small and not even close to full. I had a whole row to myself."

"Ah, nice. I, um, I actually didn't even know there was an airport in Redding until like two days ago," Ash admitted. "It's really small, huh?"

"*Tiny*," Cass said with a light laugh. "I think they only have commercial flights out to a few places. Seattle and San Francisco, for sure. Los Angeles, too, I think, and maybe Denver?"

"Ah, lucky for you, then."

There was a hint of a smile in Ash's voice now. Cass closed his eyes. "Very," he said.

“And, uh, lucky for me, too,” Ash added tentatively, and it seemed like a good opening to change the subject.

Cass’s heart clenched, and he swallowed back the lump in his throat. “I’m glad you called,” he said softly. “And I’m glad your answer is yes.”

Ash seemed to fumble for a response, starting and stopping multiple times before managing to mumble a short “yeah.”

It was adorable—how nervous Ash was. But Cass worried there was something more to it, too, and he suddenly wished his plane had been delayed overnight so he’d had an excuse to see Ash a third time before he left.

He bent his knees to sit cross-legged and leaned his head back against the wall. “Can I ask why you’re so nervous?” Cass said. Then he closed his eyes and added, “If you’re uncomfortable for any reason, I don’t—”

“No, it’s not that, really,” Ash cut in. Cass heard Ash blow out a breath, and he imagined Ash might be shifting, too, maybe sitting up, maybe running a hand through his hair. Ash continued. “It’s just . . . I’ve never, uh, done this before. That’s all.”

Cass leaned forward a little, frowning in confusion. “You’ve never done what?”

There was a quiet laugh. “Whatever it is we’re doing here,” Ash said. He sighed, and Cass thought he could maybe hear a little sadness in it. “I’m only *really* out to a couple of people—Shaina and Grant. But I kinda figured myself out late, and I dunno . . . I’ve never dated or anything. Then right when I was starting to be sure of who I was, my parents died, and that messed me up enough that I had to focus just to finish high school. It just . . . wasn’t important, I guess. That, and there’s never been anyone I’ve really *wanted* to date. Until now, I mean. Until you.”

Somewhere in all of that, Cass had closed his eyes, and his heart had started to ache. He nodded, wishing Ash could see him then. “If it helps,” he said, “I’ve never really done this before, either. I mean, I *have* dated a bit, but nothing was ever serious.”

“How, um . . . how much is ‘a bit,’ if I’m allowed to ask?” Ash’s voice had gotten small, and Cass wished again that they were together so he could really show Ash how he was feeling.

“You can ask,” he said. “You can always ask me anything.” With a soft laugh, he added, “It’s not a very exciting answer anyway. I had a boyfriend for one whole week in high school—we ended up going on half a date, and —”

“Half a date?” Ash interrupted. “There’s a story there.”

“And it’s an embarrassing story for another time,” Cass hedged. He laughed and scooted down until his head was on his pillow again. “My sixteen-year-old self swore I’d never, ever go out with anyone ever again, and I managed to stick to that until college, which is when I really started to figure myself out, too. I dated a few guys, but just first dates, mostly. Once a second date. I, uh, guess I had a knack for attracting men who thought very, very highly of themselves.” He grimaced, remembering how all of that had felt. Then he cleared his throat and continued. “When I came back to town after my mom’s stroke, I stopped dating altogether for almost a year. Then my friend Matty set me up with Joe. I’ve told you a little about him, I think. We dated for a couple of months, but, well, nothing was happening.”

“What do you mean?” Ash asked.

Cass grimaced again, not sure how to explain it. “I mean that we tried? We went out, had dates, spent time together. He’s a great guy—super sweet, smart, kind, everything I thought I wanted. He was the first guy I dated who wasn’t a selfish, egotistical creep, really. But there was just nothing there. We’re good friends now. But that’s it. It was never—” He cut himself off, realizing he’d probably said too much already.

But Ash jumped back in. “It was never what?”

Cass groaned. “Don’t laugh, okay?” he said. Then *he* laughed. “Okay, well, you can laugh but . . .” He sighed. “It was honestly exactly what I needed at the time, because like I said, Joe is a super sweet guy, and I think I kinda needed that after dating those jerks in college. But it was never, uh, exciting. In *any* sense of the word.”

Cass’s face heated up as soon as the words were out, and he immediately regretted his answer, even though it was one hundred percent the truth. But then he heard Ash snickering through the phone speaker.

“Oh, I see,” Ash said, not even trying to rein in his amusement.

And to Cass, that was *everything*.

He closed his eyes and pursed his lips. “So, that’s my whole story,” he admitted. “Nothing very interesting *or* exciting. Until now. Until you.”

Ash seemed to falter just a little then, his voice softer as he asked, “Which one am I? Interesting or exciting?”

Cass didn’t even hesitate before he answered. “Both.”



TURNED OUT THAT STAYING up chatting on the phone until two in the morning and then having to wake up at six was *not* something Cass wanted to get used to. He had to drag himself out of bed and chug two cups of coffee to feel even close to normal. When his dad came out to the kitchen around six forty-five, Cass had just set breakfast on the table next to his dad's morning newspaper.

His dad paused in the entryway to the kitchen, eyes narrowed but a soft expression on his face. "Denver?"

"Ham, cheddar, and green peppers," Cass confirmed. "No onion."

His dad tipped his head. "Just how I like it." He didn't have to say thank you; Cass could hear the gratitude in his voice. The older man moved stiffly across the kitchen to the table and lowered himself into his chair. "So, what time did you get in?" he asked, reaching out for his coffee mug.

Cass slipped into a seat across from his dad. "The plane landed just after ten."

"Mm." His dad started eating, and they fell into a comfortable silence.

Cass hadn't made any breakfast for himself; he'd eat later, with his mom. But he'd already poured himself a third cup of coffee, and he took a sip as he pulled his phone out to follow up with anything he'd missed overnight or earlier this morning.

A smile immediately brightened his face as a text message from about half an hour ago popped up on his screen.

> *Ash (6:22 a.m.):* Bri waking up before the sun was not something I planned for last night

> *Ash (6:23 a.m.):* Looks like we're going hiking again. Will you get bored if I send you photos and a running commentary of Bri-isms?

> *Ash (6:44 a.m.):* I gave her a choice of three hiking trails. She chose one we've never been to, but it's not long and looks easy enough. Wish me luck. We're off

Cass took another sip of his coffee and started to type a short response when another text popped up.

> *Ash (6:50 a.m.):* Less than a quarter mile in, and we've already found three "treasures" - a rainbow painted rock, a dandelion, and a stick

A picture popped up of Bri, looking as adorable as ever. She wore a pair of yellow leggings, a long-sleeve pink-and-yellow-striped shirt, and a denim sun hat with yellow flowers embroidered on it, and she held up a multicolored rock, as though to show it off, a huge grin on her face. In her other hand, she held a short stub of a branch, which had a few brown pine needles sticking out the end.

Cass laughed quietly before remembering he wasn't alone. When he glanced up, his dad was watching him over the top of his newspaper, amusement in his eyes. Cass grimaced.

"Sorry. Ignore me."

His dad gave him what looked like a knowing half smile and shook his head, then took another sip of his coffee and went back to reading his newspaper.

Pursing his lips to hold back any other outward reaction, he started typing again.

*Cass (6:51 a.m.):* What amazing finds! Tell her the rock is my favorite so far ;)

*Cass (6:51 a.m.):* Also, I would love photos and commentary, although I can't understand how you're already up and out hiking. How long is the trail?

*Ash (6:52 a.m.):* 4 miles out and back, but it's nearly flat. We'll be at the turnaround point in maybe a half hour, unless she insists on walking the whole way

*Cass (6:52 a.m.):* Would she really walk that far by herself?

From the other side of the table, Cass's dad set down the newspaper and then pushed his chair back. Cass straightened up and stuffed his phone back in his pocket.

"I'll get the dishes, don't even worry about it," Cass said quickly, and he stood up with his father and reached across the table to pick up his dad's plate and mug. "Anything I need to know about today? Mom doesn't have any appointments or anything?"

"No, nothing. She didn't eat a lot yesterday, but she slept well overnight. Uh, and I'll be home late. Nine, maybe. That okay?"

Cass nodded as he started over toward the sink. “Of course, yeah.”

He expected to hear his dad’s footsteps heading out of the kitchen, but when Cass turned around after setting the dishes in the sink, his dad was still standing there, watching him, an unreadable expression on his face.

Cass immediately dropped his eyes to the floor. “I-I’m sorry I wasn’t here __”

“No, no. No, Caspian.” His dad moved closer, and Cass looked back up when a solid hand set on his shoulder. “You took the time away to do something very important to you. Your mom and I recognize and support that. You have nothing to be sorry for. *Nothing.* Got it?”

Cass swallowed and nodded weakly. “Yessir.”

His dad’s hand didn’t move from his shoulder, and it felt strangely comforting in a way. He lowered his chin and closed his eyes, and his dad squeezed gently.

“I’ve gotta get going. I’ll wake your mother up,” his dad said.

Cass nodded again. “Yeah, of course.”

With a final squeeze, his dad turned and headed back down the hallway to the bedroom. Cass stood there for several seconds, trying to wrangle whatever emotions were jumbling around in his chest. Despite his father’s insistence that Cass’s trip had been fine and that both of his parents supported him fully, guilt still weighed heavy on Cass’s shoulders. He *wanted* to believe his father, though, and so he took a breath, closed his eyes, and tried to push away all of his worry and unease.

He turned back to the sink and was about to start on the dishes when his phone buzzed several times from his pocket. And he remembered he’d been in the middle of a conversation with Ash.

*Ash.*

His heart felt lighter almost immediately, and a small smile worked its way onto his lips as he pulled his phone out.

*Ash (6:59 a.m.):* She will *try* to. She’s a beast

*Ash (7:00 a.m.):* Two more treasures, which I am now the keeper of: a piece of bark and another stick. This one bigger

Another picture came through then, and Cass let out a soft breath. The picture was of Ash alone. He held a branch in his hand that was nearly as tall as he was, one end on the ground and the other end pointing up, like he was

using it as a walking stick. His beautiful smile lit up his entire face, and his eyes gleamed with what Cass assumed was amusement.

He started typing a response, but after he wrote *God, I really needed this just now*, he paused, shook his head, and deleted it. Instead, he sent a simpler message: a laughing emoji and then the words *She's making you carry that one??*

From behind him, his dad cleared his throat. "I'm heading out. Your mom says she'll be ready to get up in a few minutes."

Cass quickly spun around, shoving his phone back in his pocket. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. Thanks, Dad. I'll text you later."

His dad stared at him for what felt like forever but was probably only a second or so. Then, the side of his mouth twitched up in what had to be a smirk.

"Tell your friend I said hi."

Cass's eyes widened. "I—"

"See you tonight." With a wink, his dad grabbed his keys from the table in the entryway and then disappeared out the front door, shutting it quietly behind him.

And Cass's phone buzzed from his pocket again.

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*Cass (Friday, September 30, 2022 – 4:35 p.m.):* So, first week of classes is over. How do you feel?

*Cass (4:38 p.m.):* Call me tonight after Bri is asleep so we can chat? :)

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# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Ash

ASH HUMMED SOFTLY, STROKING Bri's forehead as she looked up at him with heavy, tired eyelids. Her skin was too warm and slightly clammy, and she'd been fighting sleep for at least the last three hours.

"Un-ca," she mumbled through a weak cough. Then she whimpered, closed her eyes, and lifted a hand to touch Ash's cheek.

Even in the dark room, Ash could see her flushed cheeks, and he frowned and swallowed hard as he cuddled her against his chest. There was a bug of some sort going around at daycare. He thought they'd been lucky; Bri seemed to have avoided getting sick, even while all the other kids around her did. But then she came home early this afternoon with a hint of the sniffles. By dinner time, she'd progressed to coughing and had a low-grade fever.

Now, at nearly midnight, she still hadn't fallen asleep. At all.

Ash had tried rocking her, walking her around the house. Hell, they'd even gone for a drive to try to lull her to sleep. And now, he was lying in bed with her, snuggling her and humming one of her favorite nursery rhymes. Nothing was working.

Ash closed his eyes, feeling himself start to drift off. Bri coughed again, however, and that woke him right back up.

"Un-ca," she managed between coughs, her eyes now tearing up.

God, he hated this. He rubbed her back gently. "Shh, shh, sweet girl. I'm so sorry," he whispered.

She closed her eyes and pressed herself up against his chest as her coughing subsided.

His phone vibrated in his pocket, and even though a part of him felt he should ignore it, he needed a distraction from the circles he was running around in his head. He slowly pulled his phone out, dimmed the brightness on the screen, and opened up his text messages with Cass, holding the phone out past Bri so the light hopefully wouldn't bother her.

*Cass (12:04 a.m.):* Any luck?

Ash leaned in and kissed Bri's forehead, once again feeling her warm, clammy skin. She didn't move or make any sounds, though, except for the slight rasp to her breathing. Tentatively, he swiped a text back.

*Ash (12:06 a.m.):* Maybe just now

*Cass (12:06 a.m.):* *fingers crossed*

*Ash (12:07 a.m.):* It's so hard to see her sick. She's only been sick one other time and that was just a little cough and stuffy nose. No fever

*Ash (12:08 a.m.):* I'm always scared it will turn into something worse

*Cass (12:08 a.m.):* I understand. Her fever is still 101-ish?

*Ash (12:09 a.m.):* Yeah. 101.2 about an hour ago. Down from 101.6 earlier. Nurse said not to worry unless it goes over 102 or she's "in distress"

*Cass (12:09 a.m.):* That was what my mom said too, if that makes you feel any better

In his arms, Bri shifted slightly and coughed once, then lay still again. Ash kissed her forehead.

*Cass (12:10 a.m.):* Should I let you sleep, or do you want to hear about the first discussion question we have assigned in my Concepts, Services, and Information class?

*Ash (12:11 a.m.):* I don't think I'm sleeping for a while yet. Tell me all about it

A screenshot came through a few seconds later of the discussion page for Cass's class. Ash sucked in a breath, trying not to laugh out loud.

*Ash (12:12 a.m.):* You have to read an article from the 1870s

*Cass (12:12 a.m.):* Yup

*Ash (12:12 a.m.):* And rewrite it for *today's* world

*Cass (12:13 a.m.):* Yup

*Cass (12:13 a.m.):* Sounds fun, right? Lol

*Ash (12:13 a.m.):* So very fun

*Cass (12:15 a.m.):* The man who wrote the article was Samuel Green, the founder of the American Library Association. I guess one of his main focuses was building the relationship between librarians and library users. They start out teaching us this because, even in today's information age, which is obviously so very different from 150 years ago, the ALA still sees librarians as stewards of information who facilitate access to all

*Cass (12:15 a.m.):* Think I've got the spiel down already? ;)

*Ash (12:16 a.m.):* I'm sold! Lol

*Ash (12:16 a.m.):* And your other class?

*Cass (12:18 a.m.):* Nothing really yet. It's a research class, and so they started out explaining how the project we're required to complete will work. More info next week, and we have to pick a topic

*Ash (12:18 a.m.):* Any idea what you're going to choose?

*Cass (12:19 a.m.):* Not yet

They continued chatting back and forth, first about the topics Cass was considering for his research class, then about Ash's classes. Bri, thankfully, continued to sleep soundly, coughing on occasion but otherwise not waking. When a natural lull in the conversation came at around one thirty in the morning, Ash set down his phone for a moment and managed to carefully shift Bri to her crib. Then he collapsed back into bed and closed his eyes.

He should go to sleep now. That was definitely what he should do. Bri was sleeping—*finally*—and he should take advantage of that. Especially since tomorrow might be another long, trying day of managing a sick toddler.

He should definitely *not* stay up longer to chat with Cass.

Yet, he found himself reaching for his phone again after only another minute or two, pushing himself up from the bed, and hitting the call button as he quietly tiptoed out of the bedroom. Cass answered on the second ring, just after Ash made it to the living room.

"Hey," Cass said, his voice deep and sleepy. "Everything okay? You didn't have to call."

"Yeah, sorry, uh . . ." Ash lowered himself to the couch, shifted onto his back, and closed his eyes. "I don't know why I called, honestly. I just . . . I'm so tired, but I'm almost—I'm scared to sleep. I think. I don't know." He rubbed his forehead, searching for the right words. But he couldn't find them. "I don't know," he repeated, and this time, the words felt almost desperate. "Can we just talk for a bit more? If you're not too tired?"

"Of course," Cass said. "Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you, too."

"Oh yeah?" Ash shifted onto his side as he tugged the blanket off the back of the couch to cover himself.

"Yeah." Cass paused and then cleared his throat. "I wanted to ask, um . . ." Cass trailed off with a quiet huff of a laugh. "Sorry, I shouldn't be so

nervous about it.”

Ash opened his eyes partway, staring off across the living room. “Thanksgiving?” he guessed, the single word strained.

“Yeah. Uh, did you decide if you’re going to Los Angeles?”

“I did,” Ash said slowly. “I am. Bri and me, I mean. Of course.”

His chest felt tight just thinking about it. The decision had been a difficult one for several reasons, not the least of which was that it would be the first time since his sister died that he’d be going back to California. But the more he’d considered his options, the more he’d realized that being *alone* on Thanksgiving—or, well, alone with just Bri—terrified him.

He could already feel the weight pressing down on him, the numbness returning to his mind and his fingers and his chest. He coughed and closed his eyes again.

“I don’t have any classes Wednesday through Sunday, so I was probably going to fly down Wednesday and back Sunday, or maybe Saturday,” he explained, just to have something to keep his mind from going to an even darker place.

“Probably?” Cass asked, and then he added, “So, you haven’t bought your plane ticket yet?”

“Not yet, no. Why?”

Cass blew out a breath, obviously nervous. “Well, I was sort of hoping maybe you could stop here on your way home,” he said. “Maybe, like, fly in Friday or Saturday and then out Sunday? There are flights here from Los Angeles and then to Seattle. And we have an extra bedroom so you could stay here, no need to get a hotel or anything. I’d, uh . . . I’d really like to see you again. If you want, that is.”

“Oh.” Ash shifted onto his back and opened his eyes to look up. Light peeked in from the street outside, casting shadowy stripes along the ceiling. He followed along each path as his brain raced in more circles. “I, uh . . .”

“No pressure if you don’t want to or aren’t ready yet,” Cass said gently. “I know traveling can be stressful enough without an extra stop. I just thought it might be a good opportunity, with the holiday and all.”

“It’s a good idea,” Ash agreed. “I just—” His throat constricted, and his heart seemed to pause, then thudded once—*hard*—in his chest before its rhythm evened back out. He forced a breath. “I just, um, I’m not sure about the cost, and I—I think I need to think about it, you know? The cost and then I’d have Bri with me, too, and I—”

“Ash,” Cass cut in, his voice firm but still gentle at the same time.

Ash swallowed again and moved one arm up to cover his eyes. “Hmm?”

“Really, no pressure,” Cass said softly. “Why don’t you think about it, and let me know when you’ve made a decision? Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Ash mumbled. “S-sorry, I just, um, it’s going to be a really hard time of the year. I already feel . . .” He shook his head, not wanting to say any more. “Sorry. I’ll let you know. Soon. And, actually . . .”

It *was* a good idea. And Ash really did want to see Cass, too. Maybe . . . maybe even go on their first date, like Cass had asked. Only, all he could feel when he thought of the holiday was that awful loneliness and sadness—so deep that he couldn’t imagine feeling anything *good* around the same time.

And that wouldn’t make for a great first date, now, would it?

But he *did* want to see Cass. He remembered just a little over a week ago, how good it had felt to have Cass there. How good Cass had made him feel. The way his body and mind had calmed when he’d allowed himself—for just that little while—to lean on Cass’s shoulder at the pier at Portage Bay.

He wanted more of that.

He wanted more *than* that, too.

The thought set his heart off again, and it did that annoying thing where it seemed to slow or pause or hold out, before beating hard and rough in his chest. He blew out a breath, closed his eyes for a long second, and then opened them and stared back up at the ceiling, following the path of the stripes of light. Back and forth.

“Yes, actually,” he said after another moment. “Yes. Let me just, um—I have to see if I can afford the difference in cost. I—”

“Wait, you mean, yes, you’ll come?” Cass asked, an unmistakable note of hope and eagerness in his voice.

Ash nodded. “Yeah. Just let me talk to Joanna and Henry. They—they were going to pay for my plane ticket and Bri’s. I’ll have to see what the cost difference would be. I can’t ask them to pay the extra amount, you know?”

“Of course, yeah.”

“I’ll call them tomorrow.”

“Okay. Great. Great. Um, and—and just to check, if you *do* come, I can take you out? On a date?”

Ash’s heart leapt up into his throat. “I mean, I’ll have Bri with me, but—”

“My parents could watch her,” Cass proposed. “If you’re comfortable with that.”

“Yeah. I mean, maybe? I would have to meet them first.”

“Of course, of course.” Cass laughed softly and then said, “Ahh, I can’t wait.”

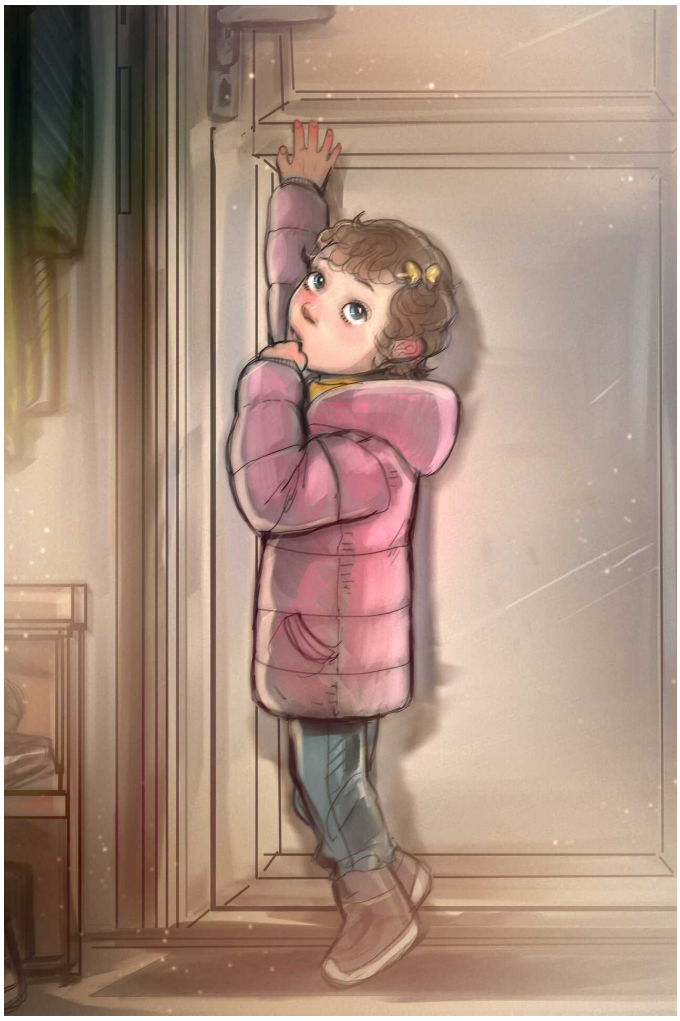
Ash let out a short breath, trying to steady his racing heart. He ran a hand through his hair, and a tiny, uncertain smile—one that he had absolutely no control of whatsoever—began to spread across his face. “Yeah,” he said, “me neither.”

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*Ash (Sunday, October 2, 2022 – 3:15 p.m.):* She's already back to her usual energetic self and insisting we go outside to play



*Cass (3:22 p.m.):* Awww poor baby

*Ash (3:22 p.m.):* Yeah. Thankfully, she gave up after a few minutes and is content to sit here and let me read her books

*Cass (3:23 p.m.):* No crying?

*Ash (3:24 p.m.):* Oh there was plenty of crying. Begging. Tugging on my hand

*Cass (3:24 p.m.):* You're stronger than I am

*Ash (3:25 p.m.):* Gotta put my foot down. Set some boundaries ;)

*Cass (3:25 p.m.):* xD

*Ash (3:30 p.m.):* So the price I found for the plane tickets with a stop through Redding is still good

*Ash (3:31 p.m.):* I was going to go ahead and book it

*Cass (3:32 p.m.):* Friday or Saturday?

*Ash (3:32 p.m.):* Arriving Friday afternoon, leaving Sunday afternoon

*Ash (3:33 p.m.):* It's actually nearly a hundred dollars cheaper than the same flight arriving Saturday >_<

*Ash (3:33 p.m.):* Good to book it?

*Cass (3:34 p.m.):* YES!!!

*Cass (3:34 p.m.):* I mean, yes, not typed in all caps ;)



*Cass (Tuesday, October 11, 2022 – 11:19 a.m.):* You'll be excited to know I got a 98% on that quiz. Thanks for the help studying last night ;)

*Ash (11:59 a.m.):* We're calling that "studying" now?

*Cass (12:00 p.m.):* Indeed lol



*Ash (Saturday, October 22, 2022 – 5:33 p.m.):* How'd the party go?

*Cass (6:57 p.m.):* Sorry, was busy cleaning up. It was good! Mom is tired now, but that's normal

*Cass (6:58 p.m.):* She was happy her brother came up from Stockton and then some friends she hasn't seen in a very long time also made it out

*Cass (6:59 p.m.):* She got your card yesterday, btw. She was very surprised and grateful. Said you're a great catch and that I should keep you around

*Ash (6:59 p.m.):* She didn't say that

*Cass (7:00 p.m.):* Okay, yeah, that was me. You're a great catch. I should keep you around ;)

*Ash (7:00 p.m.):* =P



*Cass (Thursday, October 27, 2022 – 7:51 a.m.):* Good luck on your test!

*Ash (7:57 a.m.):* Ugh, thanks

*Ash (9:41 a.m.):* Yeah, it wasn't so bad. Pretty sure I aced it

*Cass (9:42 a.m.):* I knew you would :)



*Ash (Monday, October 31, 2022 – 5:49 p.m.):* So, don't laugh



*Cass (5:50 p.m.):* Ohhhhhh my

*Cass (5:50 p.m.):* That might be the most adorable thing I've ever seen

*Cass (5:53 p.m.):* My dad says it's "otterly adorable"

*Ash (5:54 p.m.):* Wow

*Cass (5:54 p.m.):* I swear, that was him. Not me. Though it's true

*Ash (5:55 p.m.):* xD

*Ash (5:56 p.m.):* She insisted I find an otter costume. She's obsessed. I didn't think a one-year-old could get obsessed? Anyway, we lucked out and I found this one online. We're heading out with Grant and his new girlfriend. They volunteered to go trick-or-treating with us. Wish me luck! lol

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*Brendan (Tuesday, November 15, 2022 – 9:32 a.m.):* Dude, was good to see you yesterday, FINALLY. One of these days, you'll stop holding out on us. Even Joe's in on the action now

*Brendan (9:34 a.m.):* You'd make a good bard. Or maybe a cleric

*Brendan (9:35 a.m.):* Laurie says a druid, actually. Maybe she's right

*Brendan (9:35 a.m.):* We're getting together again the weekend after next. Saturday. You should come!

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# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Cass

"YOU'LL BE OKAY, THEN, ma?" Cass knelt down next to the couch and set his hand on top of his mom's, trying to pretend he wasn't in a huge hurry. "It shouldn't take too long, but the deadline is in about an hour, and I need to finish up a few things before I submit the assignment. Then I've gotta take a short quiz."

His mom's other hand came up to cover his, and she managed a small nod, though she didn't speak. That had Cass worried, and he lingered there with her for another moment, studying her tired eyes and the way her slight head tilt looked maybe a little worse than normal.

She was fine. She'd been fine. She was always extra tired after PT, and it probably hadn't helped that her appointment that morning had run late and had ended up being longer than the typical forty-five minute session.

Which was also why he was now almost late with the report he had due today.

"Okay. Call me if you need anything, yeah?"

She nodded again and patted his hand. "Go, finish your schoolwork."

He forced a small smile, leaned in and kissed her forehead, and then stood and headed down the hall toward his bedroom. His laptop was open on his desk, just as he'd left it earlier that morning.

He sat and hit the space bar to wake the computer up, then pulled a notebook out of his desk drawer and skimmed through his notes while waiting. His knee bounced up and down, and he glanced at the clock on his phone more than once before the computer had finally booted up fully. Less

than a minute later, his fingers hovered over the keyboard as he tried desperately to find the right words to conclude his report.

Two months into his classes—and only about a month until the first of his final exams—and he was struggling. He only had two classes, since he'd opted for the slower but easier of the two possible degree paths offered to students in his program. Yet it seemed like every week, he was pushing every deadline until the last possible moment. He wasn't deliberately procrastinating, but it sure seemed like he barely had enough time to get things done.

He was *really* looking forward to next week, when he'd have a few days off over Thanksgiving. Four whole days with no assignments or deadlines. His dad even had the time off work, thanks to seniority, and so Cass had very few family obligations as well.

That would allow him to concentrate on *other* things.

As if on cue, his phone lit up on the desk next to him, Ash's name popping onto the screen with the notification. Cass bit his lip, glanced at the time, and groaned.

He literally had only six minutes left to write the rest of the conclusion for his ten-page report. He was distracted. And tired. And his brain had gone completely blank.

He was screwed.

Mumbling "sorry" under his breath, even though he *knew* Ash wouldn't know, he flipped his phone over and pushed it to the other side of his desk. Then he tried to get himself to concentrate.

Five minutes later, he blew out a short breath as he hit the submit button with less than thirty seconds to spare. Then he dropped his head down onto his desk, scowling inwardly at his final sentences, which sounded like he'd just completely regurgitated the introductory paragraph.

He'd finished, though. That was the important part. He only hoped the rest of the report was solid enough that the less-than-effective conclusion wouldn't hurt his grade too much.

He glanced at his phone, which had buzzed another two times while he'd been frantically typing. Although he very much wanted to check it now, he knew that would only distract him. And he still had another deadline. So instead, he pushed himself to his feet and took a quick peek out his bedroom door.

His mom was in exactly the same spot where he'd left her, sitting on the couch with her hands in her lap, watching the TV. She tilted her head slightly,

as though she knew he was looking at her.

“Did you finish?” she asked quietly.

He swallowed and stepped out of his room. “Yeah, I just finished with the report,” he said. “I have a quiz still.”

With effort, she shifted to look at him. Her crooked smile held a sort of knowing concern and a softness that Cass could feel. “I’m okay, Caspian,” she said, one of her eyebrows lifting with amusement. “Finish up what you need to, and don’t worry about me.”

“I always worry about you, ma.” He frowned and started toward her, shoving his hands into his pockets.

They’d had this conversation before. Many times. But no matter how much his mother tried to reassure him, he couldn’t seem to *not* worry, especially now that he had so many other things tugging him in all different directions all the time.

His mom gave him a look that was part reprimand, part understanding, and she patted the seat next to her on the couch.

“You heard Dr. Granger this morning, just as well as I did. What did he say again?”

Cass rolled his eyes as he sat next to his mom and took her hand. She squeezed, though her grip was weak. “He said you’re doing very well, and he’s happy with the improvement in your dexterity and wrist strength.”

“And?” The corner of his mom’s mouth quirked up, like she was teasing him.

He groaned. “And he said you’re doing a great job with your exercises.”

“Because?”

“Ma.”

“Let me finish for you,” she said, and she paused to swallow, squeezing his hand again. “He said I’m doing so well because I have such a great support system with my wonderful son and husband. If my memory is correct.”

“Well, we can’t always trust your memory, now, can we?”

She laughed lightly, just one huff of a laugh. Cass smiled and then sighed and leaned over to kiss her forehead, like he had earlier. She hummed.

“Now go take your quiz, and then I’m sure that boyfriend of yours is waiting for you to call him.”

Cass shook his head. “He’s not my boyfriend, ma.”

“Sure, sure.”

With a long sigh, Cass pushed himself back to his feet. Then he trudged down the hall again, slipped into his seat, and clicked through the online portal to the quiz, which was now due in only twenty-two minutes.

He glanced longingly at his phone before blowing out a short breath and getting started.



*Ash (11:53 a.m.):* I have a test right now

*Ash (11:53 a.m.):* I think I'm going to fail

*Ash (11:56 a.m.):* seriously I don't know what's wrong with me. I've been studying for three hours and I can't remember a damn thing

*Ash (11:58 a.m.):* sorry

*Cass (12:59 p.m.):* I bet you ended up doing great, since you always do ;)

*Cass (1:03 p.m.):* Are you good? Can I call?

CASS STARED AT HIS phone, an unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach. Two hours had passed since his last message, and although it wasn't entirely unusual for Ash not to get back to him right away, they'd planned to talk at one, on Ash's break between classes. And it *was* unlike Ash to skip a call.

He sent another short text, a quick *Hope you're okay. Maybe we can talk later?* And when there was no immediate response to that, either, he stuffed his phone back in his pocket and headed into the kitchen to get dinner in the oven before he and his mom were supposed to leave to go see a movie.

Worry continued to nag at him, however, even if it didn't seem completely justified. He checked his phone again after the meatloaf was in the oven and again after he got his mom's wheelchair positioned in the movie theater and then again during the end credits of the movie.

Before he started the car to drive home, he sent another message to let Ash know he was worried and to please respond in some way. And then he put his phone down, gave his mom a smile, and asked her if she enjoyed the movie.

At home again, he made the rest of their dinner—mashed potatoes and green beans to go with the meatloaf. Then he helped his mom eat, set aside a good-sized portion for his dad, and did the dishes.

After his dad got home around seven, and he was officially "off duty," Cass gave his mom a hug, excused himself to his room, and pulled his phone back out.

Still nothing.

He sat on the edge of his bed and hesitated for only a few seconds before hitting the call button. It rang and then rang again and again. Ash's voicemail picked up. Cass didn't leave a message. But when he lowered the phone back down to his lap, it finally, *finally* buzzed with a text message notification. From Ash.

Cass clicked on it immediately.

*Ash (7:08 p.m.):* sorry today is not a good day

*Ash (7:08 p.m.):* i can't talk

Cass's stomach dropped, and he held his breath as he texted a short response.

*Cass (7:08 p.m.):* Are you okay?

*Ash (7:09 p.m.):* no not really

That didn't help. At all. Cass didn't know how to respond, either. And—

Shit.

Cass's eyes darted to the top right corner of his phone screen.

*Wednesday, November 16.*

God, how had he not realized it sooner?

He swallowed hard and shook his head as he typed out another message.

*Cass (7:09 p.m.):* Please let me call you

*Cass (7:09 p.m.):* I mean

He hit send, even though the message was incomplete, and closed his eyes.

Everyone grieved differently. He knew that. And while he'd never lost someone very close to him, he had friends and family members who had; he understood, at least as well as he could, how hard it could be on those left behind.

He imagined it would be even worse for Ash—having already lost his parents and then to have also lost his twin. Tomorrow—Thursday, November 17—would be the first "anniversary" of that loss.

Ash probably couldn't concentrate because of that. He probably felt more alone than ever. And he probably—

Cass shook his head again.

*Cass (7:10 p.m.):* I mean, please, if you need to talk, if you think it would help you to talk - about anything at all - please know that I'm here, any hour of the day or night

*Ash (7:11 p.m.):* ty

The message came through right away but didn't tell Cass anything about how Ash was really feeling.

He wanted to say more. He wanted to hear Ash's voice, to *know* that Ash understood he wasn't alone. But there really wasn't any more he could do right now, unless Ash decided *he* wanted to talk.

And even if Ash wanted to talk, why would he choose to talk to Cass, anyway? He'd probably rather call Shaina or Joanna and Henry. Or maybe Grant. He'd known all of them for much, much longer than he'd known Cass, and he was probably closer to them, too. They were all probably grieving with him.

In fact, he'd probably already connected with them at some point today. And hopefully he'd connect with them tomorrow, too, when everything would undoubtedly feel even worse.

A familiar spike of worry rattled Cass's chest, and he quickly glanced back down at his phone.

*Ash (7:11 p.m.):* ty

He could almost *hear* Ash's sadness in the short text. And he could feel a numbness, an emptiness. *Defeat.*

He really shouldn't say more. He knew that.

But he had to. He had to send just one more message—those words he somehow knew Ash needed to hear.

*Cass (7:15 p.m.):* You're not alone <3

He didn't wait for a response, and honestly, he didn't even expect one.

Instead, he scrolled down to Brendan's messages from the day before and typed out a short request.

*Cass (7:17 p.m.):* Hey, you free for a beer?

*Brendan (7:17 p.m.):* Fuck yeah. Come over. The Kings game just started

*Cass (7:18 p.m.):* Be there in five

Cass pushed himself to his feet as he stuffed his phone into his pocket. Then he grabbed his wallet and keys from his desk, turned off the light, and headed out.

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*Shaina (Wednesday, November 16, 2022 – 5:33 p.m.):* Tomorrow is going to fucking suck, I can already feel it

*Shaina (Thursday, November 17, 2022 – 6:35 a.m.):* I haven't heard from you in days. Please text me back to let me know you're okay

*Shaina (6:35 a.m.):* Or even that you're not okay. Just let me know that you're alive

*Shaina (6:39 a.m.):* Fuck, I mean call me. Please

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# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Ash

ASH SAT ON THE floor in his bedroom, leaning back against the bed. The arm he was using to prop himself up shook, and he could feel it was about to give out at any moment. He didn't care.

In front of him, Bri slept peacefully in her crib, just as she had all night long. He'd watched her. Every minute of the night. Watched her chest rising and falling with a slow, clear rhythm. Watched that her face stayed perfect and relaxed with sleep.

Light was just beginning to stream in through the window. Weak light. Because it was raining outside.

Fitting for a morning like this.

Fresh tears slid down Ash's cheeks, and he closed his eyes only for a second before forcing them back open.

Bri shifted in her crib.

And the pain that had been working its way forward from the back of his skull finally stabbed right through the middle of his forehead. Nausea rose up in his chest, and he doubled over, collapsing onto the floor.

A sob tore from his throat, and he quickly muffled it against his forearm, not wanting to wake his niece. He couldn't stop himself, however —the shaking, the tears, the pain pulsing through the middle of his head.

He wanted it all to go away. So, so badly.

"Un-ca Ash?"

He screwed his eyes shut tighter, cursing inwardly. Not at her, not at Bri. But at himself. At his sister for leaving him. At the world for being so fucking cruel.

"Un-ca Ash?"

Pushing himself up with one arm, he reached up and wiped the tears off his face. Then he forced himself to his feet, ignoring the stabbing pain in his head.

"Good morning, sweet girl," he said, his voice sounding foreign and so fake in its optimism.

He had no optimism. None. At all.

Bri was standing in her crib now, watching him, and when he took a step toward her, she reached up with both hands and said his name again. "Un-ca Ash. Up. Up. Up."

He listened, even though his arms felt almost too weak to hold her, and as soon as he lifted her up, she immediately placed both hands on his cheeks and leaned in to kiss him.

"Mwah! Ah beh-uh!"

God, how he wished it were that easy.

Forcing a smile, he nodded. "Thank you so much for that."

Bri grinned and kissed him again. "Mwah!"

Slowly, he made himself care for her. He changed her diaper and made her breakfast—eggs and avocado slices and strawberries. Then he changed her clothes and brushed her hair. And as she sat on the floor in the living room, playing quietly with Ollie the Octopus and her favorite colorful blocks, Ash moved to the couch, lay down on his side, and wiped away another tear that had fallen down his cheek.

Bri chose then to look over at him, and her bright smile faded. She paused and watched him, and he tried. God, he tried. He tried to not look *so awful* for her. But he couldn't do it. And so he closed his eyes, thinking maybe she'd be better off if she just didn't see whatever his expression was at all.

A moment later, a small hand set on his cheek again. He opened his eyes. Bri stood there, and she looked at him for a good few seconds, her brow furrowed with what had to be concern. Very deliberately, she set her blue octopus stuffie, the one that she *always* kept with her and *always* let comfort her, next to Ash's chest. Then she reached up and took his hand and moved it until he was hugging the stuffie against him.

Bri smiled. “Un-ca ah beh-uh?”

Ash’s heart broke again, his eyes welling up with more tears. “I miss her, Bri,” he said, even though he knew he shouldn’t and he knew she wouldn’t understand. “I miss her so much.”

Bri obviously didn’t understand, but she leaned over and hugged him, one of her chubby arms wrapping around his neck. And he held her back and let himself cry, not bothering to try to stop himself anymore.

A voice in the back of his head told him he should get going. He had a class starting in maybe about an hour now, and they’d be expecting Bri at daycare. With how badly he’d fucked up his test yesterday, he couldn’t afford to miss class today, too. Yet the thought of doing anything at all today, especially letting Bri out of his sight for any amount of time, made his stomach more upset and his headache even worse.

There was no way he was going anywhere.

“Pway?”

Bri had let go of Ash’s neck and was now tugging on his hand. But he shook his head.

“No, I’m sorry. I can’t play with you right now,” he said. “Maybe later. Okay?”

He made himself open his eyes again, though his vision blurred in and out as he tried to focus on Bri. She let his hand go.

“Book? Pweas?”

Ash shook his head. “Maybe later.”

Her bottom lip pouted out and then quivered. “Da,” she said, but her voice was sad.

He closed his eyes. And he heard Bri go back to playing with her blocks.



AROUND TEN, ASH DRAGGED himself up off the couch to change Bri’s diaper and get her some water and a snack. Since he didn’t want to feel like a total asshole, he also forced himself to go back into his bedroom and get his phone so he could text Susan at Bri’s daycare to let them know she wouldn’t be in today. It took him a couple of minutes to actually find the phone; at some point earlier that morning, when it had kept buzzing and

he'd just *needed* it to shut up, he'd tossed it across the room, and it had apparently ended up buried in a heap of laundry in the corner.

The battery was dead, and so he plugged it in and sat on the bed for a few minutes while it charged enough to power on. Bri sat with him, quietly resting her head on his arm.

When the phone finally turned on, he ignored all of the dozens of notifications that spammed the screen and instead scrolled right to the daycare's text message exchange. He tapped out and sent a short message. Then he set the phone down on the nightstand and blew out a shaky breath.

The phone buzzed.

Ash's head pulsed, sending a fresh stab of pain right down the center of his skull. He closed his eyes, which only helped slightly.

"Bri, sweetie, I think it's nap time."

"No, no nap."

Ash huffed a humorless laugh. "Uncle Ash needs a nap, sweet girl."

His phone buzzed again—this time a long buzz like an incoming phone call. Momentarily, he thought of Shaina and of Joanna and Henry, and when he glanced over at the nightstand, sure enough, Shaina's name was lit up on the screen.

He didn't want to talk to her right now, though. He *couldn't*.

Bri scooted off the bed. "No nap," she said again. And then she took off, toddling on her short little legs out toward the living room.

Ash wanted to cry. In fact, he was already crying. And he didn't want to deal with chasing her around the house or listening to *her* cry. And he didn't want to do anything at all, actually. He just wanted to curl up in a ball and have everything disappear—all his pain and hurt, the headache, the heartache. The whole entire last year.

Bri came back into the room then, carrying Ollie the Octopus, and she stopped right in front of Ash and held the stuffie out. "Un-ca nap."

Ash shook his head. "I . . . can't."

Bri frowned. "Un-ca out? Go out?" As though that were the best idea in the whole world, Bri's face lit up. "Out! Out!" She dropped Ollie and took off back into the living room again, and when she returned a moment later, she was lugging Ash's shoes, which were much too big for her to be carrying. She dropped the shoes at his feet. "Out!" she declared happily. Then she sat and started trying to lift one of his feet to stuff in the shoe.

The phone continued to buzz from the nightstand.

Ash’s head seemed to split in half, pain filling the entire right side of his skull, and he screwed his eyes shut again and reached out to pick up his phone.

“We’re not going out, Bri. I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“Out!” Bri had stuffed the front half of his left foot into his right shoe and switched to the other.

His phone stopped buzzing for only a few seconds before starting back up. He *almost* tossed it across the room again but managed to stop himself. Clenching his jaw, he looked down at the screen. Shaina’s name was there, and he knew—he *knew* she was probably panicking. Cursing and pacing and yelling at him to answer.

He did the best thing he could do. The asshole thing. He hit the red button to decline her call, opened up his text messages and found her name, then scrolled past at least a dozen messages she’d sent that he hadn’t read yet and typed out the words *im fine u can stop calling*. Which he knew told her just how *not* fine he actually was.

Then he started crying. Again.

“Out!” Bri grabbed his hand and tugged. “Out!”

“Bri, I said no,” he repeated, his tone stern. She tugged again, however, and it was just enough in his current state to pull him off balance. The room started spinning, and he dropped his phone as he reached out with both hands, barely stopping himself from tumbling onto the floor.

He groaned and closed his eyes, but everything still tilted sideways. Vaguely, he heard Bri sniffling, and he shook his head weakly. “I’m so sorry, baby girl. Can you help me?”

Two sniffles, the second stronger than the first. “Da.”

“Can you shut the door?”

The room was baby safe, and Bri could shut the door but not open it if it was closed. That was the best way to make sure Bri wasn’t going to hurt herself if he ended up lying down, like he knew he needed to.

Bri didn’t respond, and Ash forced himself to open his eyes. That was a bad idea, however, as the room began to spin again, worse this time, pulling him more and more to his left. He slumped over.

“Please, baby girl.”

“Out?” she asked quietly.

“No, I’m sorry.”

Her lower lip quivered, and a single big tear rolled down her cheek. Without another word, Bri turned, plodded over to the door, and closed it. Then she came back over to him and plopped down onto the floor, wiping her own cheeks. He couldn't stand that he'd made her so sad, but there wasn't a darn thing he could do about it right now.

He let himself slide down onto the floor with her, and she crawled into his arms. Wrapping her up in a hug, he lowered his head to rest on top of hers as she sniffled again.

"I'm sorry, baby girl."

"Out?"

Ash didn't answer this time. His phone buzzed on the bed—one of those shorter buzzes. At least Shaina had stopped calling. God, he was going to owe her the biggest apology ever, too. As soon as he could think straight, he'd text her back again.

His stomach rolled, and he sucked in a breath. He'd ignored so many texts yesterday—before his test because he'd been trying desperately to study, but then after his test, too. Because he'd failed. Badly. He'd only finished maybe half the problems in the allotted time, and the ones he had finished, he had very, very little confidence in.

It was easily the worst he'd ever done on an exam. No contest.

Even for his final exams after Ashlynn had passed away last year, he hadn't done as poorly.

And right now, he didn't even fucking care. Why the hell did any of this matter anyway? Why the hell should he care?

"Un-ca," Bri mumbled, as though reminding him. Her future depended on him. That was why it all mattered and why he should care. That was why he should be worried about his grade.

But he just felt a deep numbness. Next to the debilitating pain of loss. And his migraine.

And he couldn't make himself move.

So they sat there together, Bri in his lap, sniffling in her disappointment as Ash did the best he could to keep himself upright.

When his phone buzzed again several minutes later, Bri pushed back. "Un-ca?"

"It's okay. I'll worry about it later."

"Cass?"

"No. Or I don't know. Maybe."

Bri climbed over Ash and then stood up on her tiptoes, trying to reach his phone, which was still sitting on the bed. She wasn't quite tall enough, however, and she made a few sounds of frustration before climbing back on top of Ash this time and using his leg to stand on. He groaned.

"Bri, get down."

"No."

"Bri."

"Da!" she declared, plopping back down into Ash's lap with the phone now held tightly in both hands. She let go with one hand and started tapping one finger against the screen. "Da, da, da!"

Ash just closed his eyes and let her play with the phone, knowing she couldn't unlock it or really use it. She made cute little noises and bounced in his lap every once in a while.

Then the phone buzzed again.

And Bri continued punching on the screen with her finger.

A muffled male voice came through the speaker. "Hello?"

"Da!" Bri said happily. "Da da da!"

Ash's stomach dropped, and he opened his eyes just as Bri jumped up out of his lap and squealed, taking off toward the other side of the room. She stopped by the door and spun around to look at him as she lifted the phone up to her ear.

"Da, da, da? Da!"

"Bri, please come back here," Ash begged, but Bri shook her head and laughed. Whoever was on the other end of the line was talking, and Bri's eyes went wide as she listened. She nodded.

"Ah. Da. Da, da." She paused again as though listening, and she nodded, almost all serious like. "Da. Da-da-da-da-da-da. Da da da!"

Her babbling continued as Ash inhaled a short breath and then tried to push himself to his feet. But the whole room seemed to slip downward, tilting dangerously, and he staggered sideways and quickly grabbed onto the edge of the bed to steady himself.

"Bri, please." Ash clenched his jaw against the splitting pain in his head and slumped back down to the floor. He was utterly exhausted. And this migraine certainly wasn't helping. Bri had stopped babbling and was now watching him, only a few feet away. He tried to smile at her as he shifted to sit cross-legged. "Bri, who's on the phone? Can I have it now, please?"

She frowned quite dramatically and shook her head, holding the phone tight to her chest. “No. No, me! Me da-da-da!”

Normally, she wasn’t like this. Normally, if she *did* get like this, it was very short-lived. And normally, he’d have plenty of patience and energy to deal with it, talk to her in a way that would work.

Nothing about today, however, was normal.

He lowered his head into his hands, giving up completely, and Bri went back to her conversation with whoever was on the other end of the line. Hopefully not a random stranger or someone else she really shouldn’t be talking to. Her *Da-da-da-da*s were occasionally punctuated by a gleeful laugh or an excited squeal, which cut right through Ash’s skull like a knife.

Eventually, she became quiet, and Ash forced himself to look up. Bri had come over to him and was now sitting on the floor right in front of him, holding the phone out.

“For me now?” he asked, trying for a smile.

She grinned. “Da! Un-ca Ash. Cass talk Un-ca Ash,” she stated so matter-of-factly that Ash almost laughed.

“Thank you,” he managed, and with effort, he took the phone from her. Then he closed his eyes as he heard her get up and walk over toward her crib. A moment later, there was a clatter as her box of toys was dumped out onto the ground. Ash took a deep breath and lifted the phone to his ear. “Hello?”

“Hey.” The voice was soft and unmistakably kind, as always.

Shame and guilt immediately bubbled up inside Ash, and he swallowed hard. “S-sorry about Bri, she had my phone when you called.”

“She’s fun to talk to, actually.”

Ash exhaled with a huff. “Glad you think that.”

“I’m not entirely sure whether she and I were having the same conversation. But she told me a whole lot about, uh, something. She was quite enthusiastic about it.”

“She usually is,” Ash replied, and he let himself slip down onto his side, curling up on the floor. The room had stopped tilting. Maybe.

Cass was silent on the other end of the line for another moment. Then he cleared his throat. “Did I ever tell you that I did some volunteer work at the local library here?” he asked.

“Uh.” Ash frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“Ah, yeah, I don’t think I did. So, after I graduated from Davis and I was home full time to help care for my mom, I volunteered at the library on weekends if my dad wasn’t working. Mostly they had me helping with little projects or checking books in and out. Putting them back on the shelves. Simple things like that. But one Saturday, I remember they held this event for little kids, like Bri’s age through maybe three or four? Younger than kindergarten, for sure.”

“Yeah?” Ash opened his eyes partway. Bri had pulled out a wooden puzzle set with various shapes and numbers and was trying to fit a square into the slot for the number two.

“Yeah. So, I remember there was this one kid, he was maybe two years old. Very quiet little boy. When all the other kids were running around playing a game, he was just sitting there with his older sister, watching everyone. He really, really didn’t seem terribly interested in being there. Until we had all the kids sit down and we read them stories. Then this kid just *lit up*. He jumped up out of his sister’s arms and raced up to the front of the room and sat down *right* in the front row. Hung on every word that was read. He laughed and clapped and bounced up and down. It was adorable.”

“That’s precious,” Ash agreed. Bri set down the square puzzle piece, which was obviously not fitting in the cutout for the number two, and picked up a yellow triangle piece. She proceeded to bang it loudly against each of the slots, trying to figure out which one it fit in. Ash closed his eyes again as the sound made his head hurt more.

“It was. And then he and his family came back in the next weekend. Turns out they were new in town, and . . .”

Cass kept talking with no real rhyme or reason, just telling Ash stories. He talked about the library for a little bit longer, and then he transitioned almost seamlessly into a story about one of the first times his dad had taken him skiing up near Mt. Shasta. Apparently, he’d crashed. A lot. And he also happened to remember nearly every time, in an odd amount of detail.

Ash listened, occasionally opening his eyes to watch Bri play with her puzzle. Slowly, the painful buzzing of anxiety in his chest and the throbbing in his head began to fade, at least a little, and Ash almost, *almost* felt like he could breathe.

Bri fit a number three into the right slot and then clapped for herself.

“Da! Un-ca Ash!”

Ash gave her a weak nod and tilted the phone away from his mouth for a moment. “I see that, baby girl. Great job.”

“Da!” She picked up another piece—this one a star shape—and started again, trying to fit it into the proper cutout slot.

“She’s okay?” Cass asked gently.

Ash closed his eyes. “Yeah. She’s, uh, she’s playing with a puzzle.”

“Ahhh.”

There was a silence for a moment, but there didn’t also seem to be any expectation to fill it. Finally, Ash took a long breath and said, “Uh, you’re not . . . with your mom right now?”

“No, actually,” Cass said with a light laugh. “She’s out in the living room with a friend of hers. I made lunch for them, but I think they’re just chatting. I probably have another hour or so before Anne leaves.”

“Ah. That’s nice, I guess.” Ash grimaced inwardly, hating how awful and uninterested he sounded. He fought the urge to apologize.

“It is. Anne comes over maybe a couple of times a month. They grew up together, and my mom . . .”

Cass started talking again, easily carrying the conversation. It was on purpose; Ash knew exactly what Cass was doing. And he honestly hadn’t expected it to help at all, which was why he’d been avoiding Shaina’s texts and calls and Grant’s texts and even Cass’s texts and calls, too. But lying here, listening to Cass talk, *was* actually helping. So he didn’t interrupt or hang up or tell Cass he was fine or anything else like that. He just lay there, barely following along with whatever Cass was saying but letting the sound of Cass’s voice soothe him in whatever way it was.

Eventually, he started crying again. He wasn’t even sure why. Bri came over and sat with him, wiping his tears away and kissing his forehead with a loud “Mwah!” every time. And Cass paused the story he’d been telling and just stayed there with him, quiet but present.

“God, I could really use a hug right now,” Ash choked out. Bri immediately wrapped an arm around his neck.

“Un-ca Ash, ugg. Wuv yoo! Mwah!” She kissed his cheek and hugged him tighter, and he laughed through more tears.

“Sounds like she’s got you covered, there,” Cass said softly.

“Yeah,” Ash agreed, and he couldn’t stop himself from adding, “I’m still a mess, though. And . . . and I . . . I’m having a hard time. A really, *really* hard time.”

“I know,” Cass said, his voice as gentle and kind as ever.

And somehow, that made Ash’s heart hurt even more. He half sat up, pulled Bri into his lap, and hugged her tightly as he cried. Once or twice, he mumbled some apology to Cass, who told him it was okay to cry, and once or twice, Bri pulled back, said “Shh, shh, shh” in the cutest darn way, and then wrapped both of her arms back around his neck and hugged him again.

More time passed. Ash’s tears slowed, finally, and Bri gave him another kiss on the cheek before asking him, “Ah beh-uh?”

He wasn’t. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever be. But he’d needed that—the hugs, the tears, finally letting go at a moment when he felt both seen and safe—and so he nodded.

“A lot better. Thank you so much, sweet girl,” he said, and he wiped his cheeks and face with his free hand as Bri smiled up at him, then left to go play with her puzzle again.

Ash carefully pushed himself to his feet and promptly collapsed onto his back on his bed. He let out a long, slow breath and then laughed humorlessly.

“Still sure you want to see me after Thanksgiving? Maybe you should get out while you have the chance,” he said, covering his eyes with his free arm.

“I only wish I was there with you right now, so I could help you through this better,” Cass said quietly. The sincerity in his voice sent a rush of something through Ash’s chest. Guilt and shame, maybe, but tinged with something not so awful. Something like acceptance.

He rubbed his eyes and turned over onto his side so he was facing Bri. Then he watched her for a few seconds, marveling at how perfect she was. He took several slow breaths in and out before closing his eyes again.

“I wish you were here, too.”

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*Ash (Friday, November 25, 2022 – 1:08 p.m.):* We just boarded. Bri has a window seat again and is very, very excited about that. See you soon

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# Chapter Thirty

## Cass

CASS ROCKED BACK AND forth on the balls of his feet, waiting not-so-patiently near the baggage claim area just inside the double doors of Redding Regional Airport. He'd gotten there early, which totally hadn't been necessary; the airport was only a ten-minute drive from his house and was tiny—there wasn't any traffic or airport terminal congestion to speak of. But he'd been too anxious to sit at home waiting any longer.

According to the flight information tracker up on the wall, Ash's plane had landed a few minutes ago. Some passengers had started to filter out in his direction, and Cass tried to rein in his eagerness with a slow, steadying breath as he scanned the small crowd.

It was several more minutes, however, before he spotted them—Ash completely loaded down with Bri's car seat and diaper bag and a small purple backpack slung over one shoulder, and Bri bouncing next to him, holding his hand and looking positively adorable in a pink-and-blue-polka-dotted sweater with matching leggings.

As soon as their eyes met, Ash's smile widened, and a rush of warmth spread through Cass's chest. His feet moved of their own accord, and he met them both where a row of seats ended at the single baggage-return carousel.

"Cass! Cass!" Bri squealed, jumping up and down and reaching for him.

Ash shook his head with a weak laugh and let go of Bri's hand.

The child launched herself at him, and Cass knelt down just in time to scoop her up. “Bri, it’s so good to see you again!” he said, spinning her around in a circle before settling her on his hip.

“See you! Cass!”

He grinned and then glanced over at Ash, who was setting down the car seat and diaper bag. His movements looked stiff, or maybe just very deliberate and measured, and the smile on his face seemed tighter than it had a second ago. When Ash lifted his eyes again and straightened up, Cass’s heart stumbled, and heat rose in his cheeks.

He’d been waiting for this moment for what seemed like forever. Picturing it, almost exactly like this, really. And now that it was here—now that *Ash* was here—it almost didn’t seem real.

He smiled softly. “Hey,” he said, his voice definitely coming out deeper than he’d intended it to.

Ash held his gaze and didn’t say anything for several seconds, then he dipped his chin. “Hey.”

“Un-ca Ash see Cass!”

Ash’s face turned bright red, and he shook his head as he reached up to rub the back of his neck. “Yeah, baby girl, we’re here to see Cass,” he said.

Bri squealed with delight, which made Cass’s grin grow even more. He shifted her a bit on his hip.

“You have luggage, yeah?”

“Yeah, just one bag.”

Cass nodded. “They’re usually pretty quick here. It should be out any minute.”

As if on cue, the baggage carousel began to move, and Bri immediately started to squirm, pushing at Cass’s chest. “Down! Down!”

Cass glanced at Ash for permission, and Ash nodded.

“Alright, here you go,” Cass said, gently setting Bri on her feet. He took her hand to keep her from running off, and then he followed as she tugged him toward the baggage carousel like she knew exactly what was going on. “Are you going to find Uncle Ash’s bag?”

“Da! Boo!”

Cass narrowed his eyes. “Boo?”

“Boo!”

Ash laughed, and Cass glanced back over his shoulder to where Ash stood. “Blue,” he said, adding, “It’s a black bag with a bright-blue tag on

it.”

“Da! Boo!” Bri declared again.

Cass grinned and nodded, holding Ash’s gaze for an extra couple of seconds before he turned back to the baggage carousel. A few smaller bags came out first, and Bri jumped up and down excitedly with each one.

“No,” she said as the first one passed by them. Then again, “No . . . no . . . no.” A blue luggage bag was next in line, and Bri giggled. “Boo! No. No Un-ca Ash!”

“Oh, are you sure? It’s not that one?” Cass asked, kneeling down next to Bri.

Bri turned to Cass, and then dead serious, she said, “No. Not boo. No Un-ca Ash.” She shook her head and turned back to watch the carousel.

Cass pursed his lips to hold in his laughter, and he glanced at Ash again, who now stood with his arms crossed over his chest and an amused look on his face. Cass’s heart felt almost too full, and for a moment, he didn’t breathe.

Then Bri made a very loud, very high-pitched sound *right* in his ear.

“Boo! Boo boo boo! Cass boo!” She jumped and pointed with her free hand and then started dragging him over closer to the carousel, where there was, indeed, a black luggage bag with a blue tag on it. Bri was much, much too excited, and when the bag got close enough, she tried to lunge forward to grab it, but Cass stopped her, scooping her back up into his arms.

“Ahhh, let me, okay?” he said, holding the squirming toddler while also bending over to pick up the luggage. It was a good-sized bag but not overly heavy, and he easily lifted it off the carousel. Bri stopped wiggling around as he set the bag on the ground and pulled up the handle. “There we go, all done.”

“Ah done! Ah done! Un-ca Ash! Boo!” Bri clapped, happy and bright, and Cass grinned right along with her. He turned them around to face Ash, and Bri clapped again and reached out toward him with both arms. “Un-ca!”

Cass held her tight so she didn’t fall and stepped closer to Ash, pulling the luggage bag behind him. When they were close enough, Ash took Bri from him, and her arms immediately wrapped up around his neck.

“Did you help Cass get the luggage for us?” Ash asked, settling Bri on his hip. He smiled so softly at her, like she was the most precious thing in the world to him.

She nodded enthusiastically and pointed at the luggage. “Boo!”

“Great, thank you so much!” Ash said. He lifted his eyes back to Cass, and this time, Cass thought his heart maybe skipped a beat. Or several.

Cass inhaled a slow breath and then blinked and looked down. “So . . . ready to go, then?” He hooked a thumb toward the exit. “My car’s parked just outside. I can carry the car seat for you.”

Ash ran his free hand through his hair and then glanced down at the diaper bag and car seat sitting next to him. “Yeah, sure, that would help a lot. Thanks.”

Cass smiled, then picked up both the diaper bag *and* the car seat, ignoring Ash’s weak protest, and led the way out through the double doors and across the narrow road to the parking lot. Neither of them talked this time, though Bri babbled a bit and then giggled at herself.

They took a few minutes to install the car seat in the back of Cass’s car, and then Ash got Bri strapped in and settled—with her adorable blue octopus stuffie named Ollie—while Cass loaded the luggage and diaper bag, along with Bri’s small purple backpack, into the trunk of the car. He shut the trunk just as Ash shut the car door.

Then, for what Cass knew would be much too short a time, they were alone. Sort of.

Ash stood there almost awkwardly, staring down at the ground with his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans. And even though Cass’s heart was hammering in his chest, he took a small step closer, swallowed, and said, quietly, “So . . .”

Ash nodded slowly and pulled his hands out of his pockets, like he knew exactly what Cass was thinking. “Please.”

There was a desperation in the single word, reminiscent of how Ash had sounded much of the time when they’d been on the phone the week before. It broke Cass’s heart.

He took another step closer, and then they both closed the final distance together, Ash’s arms slipping easily around Cass’s midsection as Cass wrapped his arms around Ash’s shoulders. They were nearly the same height, Ash maybe only an inch or two shorter, and his head fit perfectly right there on Cass’s shoulder. After half a second of hesitation, Ash’s body shuddered, and he melted into Cass with a long, deep sigh, as though finally letting go of whatever tension he’d been holding. Cass squeezed gently and closed his eyes, tilting his head to rest against Ash’s.

It was all warmth and relief and comfort, even for Cass. He held Ash tighter, like he'd been wanting to all week, and Ash's body trembled again.

"Sorry, I—I really needed this," Ash mumbled, and though he loosened his arms slightly, he didn't let go or back up.

Cass nodded against Ash and let his hand drift up and down, gently rubbing Ash's back. "I know," he said.

Ash huffed a weak laugh, his warm breath hitting Cass's neck, and Cass closed his eyes again. They stayed there for another few seconds, until Ash finally pulled back and let his arms drop to his sides. He looked down, almost as though embarrassed, then glanced into the car. Cass followed his gaze.

Bri was sitting there, watching them with a huge smile on her face. She giggled, though the sound was muffled since she was in the car.

Ash groaned but forced a smile and then waved at her. And Bri clapped her hands, said something Cass couldn't really decode, and then picked up her octopus toy and started bouncing it up and down.

Ash sighed and lowered his eyes to the ground again.

"Hey," Cass said softly, and he reached out slowly and brushed his fingers against Ash's. A small smile worked its way onto Ash's lips, and when he looked back up, his cheeks were tinged pink. "Ready to go now? My parents are looking forward to meeting you. Especially my mom."

Ash's smile relaxed, and his eyes brightened with amusement. "Should I be worried?"

"Not in the slightest," Cass replied easily. "Although I'm sure they'll both be teasing *me* every chance they get. And don't listen if my mom tells you the go-cart story. Please." He stepped around Ash and opened the front passenger side door, grinning.

Ash stood there, laughter in his eyes. "The go-cart story, huh?"

"Yeah. She'll *very* conveniently forget to mention that I was six years old at the time."

Ash grinned wider, still holding Cass's gaze. Heat started working its way up into Cass's cheeks again, and he bit his lower lip, barely able to stop himself from reaching out to take Ash's hand.

Clearing his throat, Cass tilted his head toward the car. "Ready?"

"Yeah."



THE SHORT DRIVE WAS quiet because nearly as soon as they got on the road, Bri fell sound asleep. When they pulled into the driveway at Cass's house a few minutes later, Ash glanced into the back seat and grimaced, explaining in a whisper that her nap schedule had been off since last week. Cass nodded, and then they both got out of the car. He popped the trunk to gather Ash's things while Ash skillfully unstrapped Bri and lifted her into his arms, all without waking her.

A moment later, Cass shifted the diaper bag on his shoulder so he could open the front door. "After you," he said softly, tilting his head to direct Ash inside. "The guest bedroom is down the hallway, the second door on the right."

Cass followed Ash in and shut the door behind him. Ash paused just inside the entryway, and Cass heard his mom's voice from the living room.

"Oh, my, look at that precious angel."

He stepped up beside Ash and smiled as he met his mom's eyes and then his dad's. They sat together on the couch, his dad closing the book they'd been reading, and his dad looped an arm up around his mom's shoulders.

Warmth filled his chest as he held his dad's gaze for an extra moment, and then he smiled again and tipped his head toward the hallway. "I'm going to help him get Bri settled," he said quietly. His mom nodded, her face bright with joy. The warmth in his chest grew.

Tentatively, and just for guidance—not any other reason *at all*—Cass placed his free hand on Ash's lower back and pressed gently. "Just down the hallway," he said.

Ash nodded to Cass's parents with a shy smile that Cass found more than a little endearing and then stepped forward slowly, cradling Bri in his arms. Cass followed again, letting his hand drop away when they entered the narrow hallway.

The bedroom at the end of the hallway was neat and clean and free of any clutter—thanks to the several hours Cass had spent in there while the turkey had been cooking the day before—and Cass only hoped it would be comfortable enough for Ash and Bri for the next two days.

Ash paused after he stepped inside the room, and a small smile grew on his lips. He glanced back over his shoulder at Cass. “Thank you. The outlet covers are appreciated,” he said, still keeping his voice low.

Cass nodded as he set down the diaper bag and Bri’s backpack and quietly retracted the handle on the suitcase. “Did you end up bringing that portable crib you mentioned? It fit in here?” He motioned to the suitcase.

“Yeah, it works really well actually,” Ash replied.

“I’ll set it up for you, then?”

Ash’s smile softened. “That would be great.”

It took only a minute or two for Cass to open the suitcase, pull out the neatly packed portable crib Ash had fit in alongside his clothes and toiletries, and set it up. After double checking that it was solid and that the mattress was properly in place, Cass stepped aside so Ash could lay Bri down.

Bri didn’t move, even when Ash straightened back up, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Maybe she’ll be out for an hour, if we’re lucky.”

“An hour sounds good,” Cass said. “I was hoping—oh, doesn’t she need __”

“Oh shoot, Ollie, yeah.”

Cass smiled and set his hand on Ash’s back again. “It’s in the back seat, yeah?” When Ash nodded, Cass said, “Cool, I’ll be right back. One sec.”

He turned and jogged back down the hallway, out the front door, and to the car. Bri’s stuffed octopus sat on the floor in the back seat, where it must have fallen at some point. He quickly picked it up and jogged back inside.

His dad arched his eyebrows at Cass as he headed toward the hallway again, and Cass just held up the stuffie. His mom’s smile grew, and his dad laughed lightly. Cass continued back to the bedroom, where Ash was waiting, leaning over the edge of the crib and brushing the hair from Bri’s forehead.

“Got it,” Cass said quietly.

He handed the toy to Ash, who set it carefully next to Bri. Bri made a small sound in her sleep but didn’t wake, and Ash backed up a step until he stood shoulder to shoulder with Cass. And something right then made more of that wonderful warmth flood Cass’s chest. He couldn’t even put a name to the feeling, and it almost didn’t really make sense. After all, they weren’t even touching. They hadn’t even gone out yet, and they were still just friends.

God, if he was already feeling this just standing next to the man, was he even going to survive it if they kissed?

The thought sent a rush of heat to Cass's face, and he swallowed hard, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"So, we've got about an hour, then?" he said. He tried not to sound too eager; he loved spending time with Bri, and he didn't want Ash to think otherwise. But he'd be lying if he said he didn't want some alone time with Ash.

There was a light laugh next to him, and he glanced over. Ash was watching him, a knowing but also shy smile on his face.

"Probably, yeah," Ash said. "Though not if we stand in here and keep talking."

This time, it was Cass who laughed. He nodded and motioned toward the door, then he let his hand settle low on Ash's back as they left the room together. He closed the door most of the way, leaving it cracked a couple of inches.

"That's good, yeah?" Cass asked. "So we can hear when she wakes up?"

Ash nodded. "Yeah. She'll call for me."

Just like outside the car at the airport, they were sort of "alone" again, and although Cass knew his parents were waiting for an official, real introduction, he was in no hurry to lead Ash the rest of the way back down the hall to the living room. He inhaled a slow breath and then reached out to take Ash's hand in his. Their fingers played together for a second, the touch tentative and yet not.

Cass stared, mesmerized, and when he ventured a glance back up, he saw the same awe in Ash's expression. He closed his fingers around Ash's and gave a gentle squeeze.

"This, uh—" Cass's voice caught in his throat, and he shook his head as Ash lifted his eyes. Their deep blue sent Cass's heart racing, and he stared for another few seconds before huffing a laugh and then trying again. "This is okay, yeah? The room? Staying here? I figured it would be better than a hotel."

That wasn't what he'd really wanted to say, but he was apparently too nervous to articulate whatever thoughts he'd had right then anyway. Ash seemed to understand, the corner of his lips twitching up into a half smile.

Ash's fingers tightened in Cass's. "It's perfect."

“Okay, good.” Cass was ninety-nine percent sure Ash hadn’t been referring to the accommodations. He took a slow breath to steady himself and then tipped his head toward the living room. “So, ready to meet my parents?”

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*Shaina (Friday, November 25, 2022 – 4:01 p.m.):* It was so good to see you <3 Wish you were here longer, but I totally get why you left early ;)

*Shaina (4:03 p.m.):* Keep me updated on how it goes, I want allllllll the DEETS!

*Shaina (4:12 p.m.):* Also, sorry I was a jerk on Thursday. I know last week was awful for you, and I understand why you didn’t want to talk. Love you always <3

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# Chapter Thirty-One

## Ash

AFTER MEETING CASS'S PARENTS, Ash understood exactly where Cass's kindness came from. His mom, Paula, was one of the sweetest women Ash had ever met, and his dad, Robert, was just this strong, confident presence, which was welcoming in a way Ash couldn't explain. They only spent a few minutes talking before Robert excused himself and Paula to go outside and enjoy the unseasonably warm weather from the back patio.

Then Ash and Cass were alone. Again.

For how long, he wasn't sure, and he had the fleeting thought that it might always be like this—stealing moments together alone when they could. It was a strange thought, though, since this was really only the first day they'd been together. Yet already, they'd only had these passing moments—the minute or so hug outside of the car at the airport, the few seconds in the hallway . . .

He caught Cass's gaze and tried for a smile, which actually wasn't as hard as he expected. "So, what now?"

"Now . . . we cook?" Cass half grimaced and then shrugged. "Super exciting afternoon, I know, but it's sort of tradition."

Ash laughed lightly. "Didn't you cook yesterday?"

"I did," Cass confirmed. "I made a whole Thanksgiving spread, and we'll have leftovers for a week. But"—Cass tipped his head toward the kitchen, indicating for Ash to follow—"my mom's absolute favorite food is

this creamy turkey barley soup that her mom always made after every Thanksgiving. And so, now we make it, too. Or, well, *I'm* making it, I mean."

"For the first time?"

"No, the second time. Last year was the first. But I used to help my mom make it every year when I was a kid, and I love to cook, so it's not hard."

They passed through an entryway and stepped into a small kitchen. A dining table surrounded by four chairs barely fit along one side of the room, and the old countertop and cupboards showed their age but looked well cared for, much like the rest of the house.

Cass moved to the fridge, opened it, and started taking out containers of broth, turkey, and veggies. Ash followed and found a spot next to the stove where it didn't look like he'd be in the way. He leaned back against the counter.

"Your dad doesn't cook?"

Cass huffed a laugh and shook his head. "Nope. Well, he *can*, but he doesn't like to, and he tends to overcook or undercook or, uh, over-season . . ." He set the ingredients on the counter on the other side of the stovetop. "It generally doesn't turn out great."

"Ah, I see."

"But, as I said, I love to cook, so it's okay. As long as you're not going to be too bored right now. It'll only take a few minutes here to get cooking and then it just simmers for a while."

"I don't mind. I actually like to cook, too, but I learned from my dad, not my mom. My mom burned anything she tried to cook. Actually, she somehow set the kitchen on fire once trying to make taco shells."

Cass laughed again and grabbed an onion from a bowl sitting on the counter. "Let me guess, started heating the oil, left the kitchen for some reason, and—"

"—forgot about it, yup." Ash grinned, because it was one of those memories he'd never forget, even if there was now a sadness attached to it. "She, uh . . . I mean, my sister . . ." He let out a breath. "Can I help you chop those?" He indicated to the onion, carrots, and celery Cass had set out next to a cutting board.

Cass seemed to hesitate for a second, and Ash glanced up. Cass's eyes were filled with kindness and concern and some deep, gentle understanding.

“That would be amazing, thank you,” he said, and he reached over, pulled a knife out of the block on the counter, and handed it to Ash.

With a slow breath, Ash started talking as he chopped, and Cass began heating some butter in a large pot on the stove.

“My sister was usually this ray of sunshine—always happy and energetic, always looking at the positive side of everything. This one day, though, when we got home from school—I think we were twelve or thirteen? It was middle school, but I’m not sure if we were in seventh or eighth grade—anyway, she went straight to her room and shut the door and wouldn’t come out.” Ash finished chopping the onion and moved on to the carrots and celery as Cass added the onion along with some garlic to the pot. “I’d had a kinda bad day myself,” he continued, “and so I just went and shut myself in my room to do homework. When my mom got home, she checked in with me and then Ashlynn, and then she went to make dinner. A few minutes later, I heard Ashlynn crying—our bedrooms were next to each other, and the walls were pretty thin. I tried to go talk to her, but she’d locked her door and wouldn’t let me in. I was really worried, since it was so unlike her. So I went to tell my mom. She’d just poured a bunch of oil into a pan, and she was going to fry the tortillas in it to make homemade taco shells. I guess maybe she thought she wouldn’t be long? She got Ashlynn to open the door, and they ended up talking for a while. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but I heard Ashlynn crying more. A little while later, my mom walked by my room and thanked me for telling her something was wrong with Ashlynn, and she went into her room instead of back to the kitchen. Ashlynn came in and apologized to me after a bit, said she’d just had a really bad day and wasn’t sure how to deal with it. Something happened with a friend of hers, I guess—I can’t really remember exactly what now. We talked some more, and she was about to grab her backpack so we could study together when I smelled smoke. The smoke detector went off right after that. Mom cursed—” Ash laughed and shook his head. “My mom *never* cursed out loud unless she thought we couldn’t hear her. Anyway, she said something like ‘Oh shit!’ and rushed out into the kitchen. My dad had just walked in the door. He grabbed the fire extinguisher, yelled at me and my sister to stay back, and he put out the fire. It didn’t spread from the stove, but the walls and ceiling were all black, the pan was ruined, the whole house smelled *bad*.”

“Oh wow. That could have been so much worse,” Cass commented.

“Definitely.” Ash nodded as he finished chopping the celery. “Ashlynn started crying again, and my mom started crying, but my dad, he just shook his head, went over to the sink and sort of casually washed his hands, and then said, ‘Guess we’re going out for dinner. Who wants burritos from Casa Durango?’ And that was it.”

Cass laughed lightly. “Honestly, that sounds like what my dad would have said in the same situation.”

“He was pretty laid back about most things,” Ash said. He set down the knife and lifted the cutting board. “All of it in?”

“Ah, yep. I think I need a little more butter, too.”

Ash carefully added the celery and carrots he’d cut to the pot while Cass added another dollop of butter. They continued cooking in silence for a few minutes. Cass stirred the veggies, added some flour and then several cups of chopped turkey and two large containers of turkey broth he’d prepared the day before, along with some spices and half a cup of barley pearls.

“There we go. Now, we’ve got about a half hour,” Cass said as he took out his phone. “Setting an alarm, so I don’t forget.”

“No kitchen fires.”

“Nope.”

After clicking a few buttons on his phone, Cass stuck it back in his pocket and then looked up at Ash again. The expression on Cass’s face was nothing short of joy and adoration; even with his level of relationship inexperience, Ash could see that perfectly well. He held Cass’s gaze for several long seconds, feeling his cheeks flush with heat.

This was real.

Now.

Here.

Him and Cass. Together. About to start something Ash had no idea how to make work or how to control or how to . . . do.

He *felt* the pull already—some deep, strong desire he’d only ever imagined. And a part of him desperately wanted to just let it happen. To give in to whatever it was his body and mind wanted. It was oh so tempting.

But even as he thought that, he felt himself backing away, suddenly overwhelmed. A heavy weight pressed down on his chest, reminding him of all the reservations he’d had about trying to start a relationship in the first place. The potential pain and grief and heartache, and how he wasn’t sure

he could survive it if he let himself feel everything and really care about someone.

Hell, it had only been a little over a week ago that he'd been a complete mess, broken and numb and crying on the floor of his bedroom, unable to take care of himself or his niece.

Was he ready for this? Was it even a good idea to try? Sure, they'd agreed to move slowly; that was the only way this could possibly work, anyway. But also . . . could he even *be* what Cass wanted him to be? Or would he just be hurting *both* of them by trying?

He tore his gaze away, sucking in a sharp breath, and forced a smile on his face. "I should probably check on Bri real quick," he said, hiking a thumb over his shoulder.

"Sure, of course." Cass gave Ash the softest smile. "Can I come with you, or do you want me to stay here?"

"Um . . ." Ash blinked his eyes closed and dropped his chin. "Stay here, maybe? I'll just be a minute."

It felt wrong, almost, his response. Like he was already telling Cass he needed space, even though they'd only spent a little bit of time together. And it wasn't even that. It wasn't that he needed space at all.

He was just overwhelmed.

And he didn't know how to handle things.

He shook his head. "Actually, you can come with me," he corrected, and he tried harder. *He* reached out this time; *he* made the move. His fingers slipped into Cass's, and the warmth and connection were immediate—just as they had been when Cass had held his hand earlier. And when Cass's fingers closed around his, softly but confidently, a tingle worked its way up his arm and into his chest. It was comforting. Warm and safe and comforting.

All of that anxiety he'd had sort of faded. It didn't disappear, but it stopped screaming at him.

He breathed a deep sigh and squeezed Cass's hand back, and together, they walked down the hallway to the guest bedroom.

As he'd suspected, Bri was still sound asleep in her portable crib, Ollie the Octopus now pulled tight against her chest. Ash stopped about a foot away from the crib, and Cass moved right up next to him. Neither of them said anything, but Ash gave himself permission to stay there for a moment,

watching his beautiful niece sleep while trying to get used to the feeling of *not* being there alone.

That itself was almost overwhelming, too.

A deep shudder rattled through him, and he swallowed back the thought that he shouldn't even be here right now. Because his niece should still have her mom, which would mean he shouldn't have even met Cass in the first place, and—

"She's beautiful and looks so peaceful," Cass whispered, interrupting the beginning of wherever Ash's spiral had been going. Soft fingers laced gently through his, shifting the hold of their hands. "Should we let her sleep?"

Wordlessly, Ash nodded, and then he let himself be led back out of the room, down the hallway, and into another room. When he was sitting on some cushy surface, Cass kneeling in front of him, holding both of his hands now, he finally blinked and looked around, registering where they were. One whole side of the room was taken up by a large, dark-wood bookcase, which was filled to the brim with neatly organized books of all shapes and sizes. More bookshelves were mounted on the walls over a dresser, and across from the bed, where he sat, was a small desk covered with textbooks, papers, and an older-looking laptop. It felt inviting and comfortable. Lived in.

"Your room?" he asked quietly, lowering his eyes to Cass.

"Yeah," Cass said. He squeezed Ash's hands. "You okay?"

Ash nodded again but didn't say anything else for a moment. He wasn't sure what to say or whether there was anything to say. Did he need to explain himself? Did Cass need to know every thought running through his head, no matter how big or small? Was he expected to share all of it, because they were supposed to be in a relationship now? Or something?

Cass's thumbs began rubbing gently across the back of his hands. It felt so good.

But that only hurt more. How could he be allowed to have this something good, when his sister—

Ash blew out a breath and shook his head, lowering his eyes down to where Cass's hands clasped his. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Cass tightened his fingers around Ash's hands again. "You have nothing to apologize for."

“I can’t—I can’t seem to get out of my head, and everything is so confusing,” he admitted.

Cass’s thumbs stopped moving, which was almost painful. “Is all of this too much? Do you want me to stop—”

“No,” Ash cut in, holding Cass’s hands tighter. “No, I don’t want you to stop. You’re being amazing. Really. I just . . . I don’t . . . know.”

“If it’s too fast, I can slow it down.” Cass seemed to hesitate, and Ash forced himself to look up. Gentle, kind brown eyes met his, and that feeling of comfort came right back with a calm that spread through his chest. Cass gave him a weak smile and continued. “I just see you hurting, and I want to help however I can. I want to remind you that you’re not alone, and I want to make sure you know I’m here in whatever capacity you need me to be. But also, uh . . . I want to help you find joy and happiness. I hope you know that you’re *allowed* to be happy. You *deserve* to be happy.”

“I *want* to be happy,” Ash confessed quietly.

“I know.”

Ash watched, his heart pounding, as Cass slowly lifted one of Ash’s hands to his lips and placed the gentlest of kisses on Ash’s knuckles. The touch sent a surge of warmth through him, and he closed his eyes as the warmth turned to contentment and the overwhelm faded again. Something in his head calmed down, steadied out, quieted.

And Cass’s thumbs began their lazy caress of Ash’s skin once more, brushing softly back and forth.

That helped, too. Much, much more than he expected.

He sighed and dipped his chin, and he found himself wishing that maybe, *maybe* they could just stay like this, sitting right here like this, together, forever. Because then *maybe* he could keep feeling this way—not so lost and broken, not drowning alone in the darkness, wondering if he’d ever get to come back up for air.

He squeezed Cass’s hands. “I want to be happy,” he repeated, his voice catching in his throat. *Help me. Please.*

Cass didn’t say anything, but somehow, he seemed to know exactly what Ash was thinking. Again. He stood slowly and pulled Ash to his feet. Then, with the gentlest touch, he wrapped his arms around Ash in a warm, comforting embrace.

With another shuddering sigh, Ash melted into Cass’s chest, letting his friend’s solid presence give him whatever it was he so desperately needed.

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*Joe (Friday, November 25, 2022 – 5:59 p.m.):* Happy belated Thanksgiving! Hope you and your family had a great day :) Did you cook?

*Joe (6:01 p.m.):* So, interesting news - my sister just told me she's moving up to Washington at the end of the school year to take a job in the Bellevue School District

*Joe (6:01 p.m.):* I might go with her, actually

*Joe (6:05 p.m.):* Call me whenever you get a chance, I could really use someone to bounce ideas off of

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# Chapter Thirty-Two

## Cass

CASS'S HOUSE HAD ALWAYS felt like home to him. He'd grown up here, lived here his whole life. Inside the walls, it was safe and comfortable, the space filled with wonderful memories of his childhood and beyond.

He'd never thought it could possibly feel any *better*.

Yet, as he finished loading the dishwasher with the last of the bowls and spoons they'd used at dinner, the sounds carrying from the living room and from down the hallway seemed to surround him with even more of a sense of wholeness.

Gentle banter between his parents as they put together a puzzle on the coffee table out in the living room.

Squeals of delight from Bri as Ash gave her a bath in the bathroom at the end of the hall.

He turned around and settled back against the counter, listening.

"Da! Da-da-da spwash! Spwash! Da!" Bri laughed, and then Ash did too. Ash said something, though his voice was too muffled to hear, and then Bri started jabbering again, a mix of her nonsense babbling, giddy laughter, and words Cass could mostly understand. "Da-da spwash! No! No, Un-ca! Ah! Da-da-da! Spwash!"

With a grin, he pushed away from the counter, turned out the kitchen light, and peeked into the living room. The scene made his heart happy. His dad's arm was around his mom's shoulders, and the older man brushed a kiss on his wife's temple and then leaned forward and pressed a puzzle

piece into one corner of the partly finished puzzle. Cass's mom hummed and said something Cass couldn't hear, and then his dad nodded.

"Ah, you're right, dear. Yep." He picked up another piece and set it in its place.

Cass's smile softened. He cleared his throat quietly and said, "Dishes are done."

His dad glanced up at him and gave a small nod, and his mom turned toward him, her eyes tired but still full of that same joy he'd seen in them earlier. She smiled and lifted her good hand, motioning him over.

He stepped into the living room fully, and when he reached the couch, he knelt down in front of her and took her hands in his.

She seemed to study him for a long moment, and then her smile widened in its beautiful lopsided way. She slowly lifted her hand and touched his cheek. "He's such a sweet man, Caspian," she said. "I'm so happy for you."

Heat flooded his cheeks, and he dipped his chin. "Thank you, ma," he managed, though his voice broke. He knew he should say more to really thank both of them for welcoming Ash and Bri into their home. But no more words would come.

His mom dropped her hand back to her lap, and Cass looked up again. She was still smiling at him, and then she blinked and gave him a weak nod. She, too, seemed like she wanted to say more, but she just twisted slightly to look at Cass's dad.

"I'm pretty tired," she said.

His dad nodded, leaned in and kissed her forehead, and then stood and slowly started helping his wife off the couch and into her wheelchair. "We'll see you in the morning," he said to Cass.

"Yeah." Cass kissed his mom good night and gave his dad a nod. Then he stepped out of the way to give his dad room to push his mom's wheelchair down the hallway to their bedroom.

It wasn't that late—just after 8:00 p.m.—but he locked the front door and turned out the lights in the living room anyway before padding down the hallway toward his own bedroom. The squealing and giggling from the bathroom had stopped, and the bathroom door was open, the light turned out. Quiet murmuring from the guest bedroom carried just outside the door, which was open a few inches, and Cass stepped up to the doorway and paused, his heart full.

Ash sat on the floor cross-legged, straightening Bri's pajama shirt as she bounced in place. Her hair curled in all directions, and her smile lit up as she clapped her hands together.

"Book!" she declared, and she clapped again. "Book, book, book!"

"Yes, yes, you're absolutely right, sweet girl. It *is* book time," Ash agreed, his voice so soft and caring that Cass could feel every bit of love Ash had for his niece just from those few words.

Bri bounced up and down, clapping. "Yay yay yay!" She looked up over Ash's shoulder. "Cass! Cass, book! Book!" She hopped up, toddled over, and grabbed Cass's hand. "Un-ca Ash, Cass, book!" she said definitively, tugging Cass along with her into the room.

Cass grinned and followed, letting Bri lead him over to where Ash still sat, now looking up at Cass with an amused smile on his face.

"Uh, sorry, I . . ." Cass laughed and shook his head as Bri plopped down onto the ground next to Ash, pulling Cass with her.

"Cass book!"

Ash pursed his lips as though trying to hold back laughter. "I guess you're reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* for us tonight," he teased, reaching over to take a book out of Bri's purple backpack.

Cass settled cross-legged next to Ash, and Bri crawled up into his lap and clapped.

"Ca-piar! Cass book! Cass book!"

"Okay, okay, yes, I would love to read the book to you tonight, Bri," he said, laughing.

She clapped again, clearly quite excited. Cass grinned and mouthed *she's adorable* as his eyes met Ash's, and Ash's smile widened. With a nod, Ash held out the board book, its thick white cover painted with a familiar, colorful caterpillar. Their fingers brushed together with the handoff, and Cass paused, heat rushing to his cheeks. His heart thrummed, and he let his fingers linger there, barely grazing Ash's, for what seemed like several long seconds.

Then Bri settled back into Cass's lap, tipping her head to rest on his chest. "Book?"

Ash's face reddened, which was also absolutely adorable, and he coughed and pulled his hand back. "Yep, yep. Cass is going to read for us, right, Cass?"

“Ah, yep,” Cass said, and he shifted a bit to make himself more comfortable, positioning the book out in front of him so Bri could see.

Ash scooted closer as Cass cleared his throat and then started to read. It had been years since he’d picked up that particular children’s book, but he still remembered the words and story well. And, to his surprise, Bri sat quietly in his lap, watching and listening without reaching out to touch the pages or clapping or trying to read or any of the other cute things he’d sort of expected her to do.

When Cass finished, Bri yawned and snuggled up against him and mumbled, “Book?”

Cass glanced over at Ash, who smiled softly and shook his head.

“She’ll be asleep before you’d even start a second time,” he whispered.

Sure enough, just as Ash finished those words, Cass felt Bri slump into him more. He set down the book and then slowly shifted Bri up to cradle her in his arms. Her head rested against his shoulder, and she sighed contentedly, her eyes now closed. With a smile, he lifted his gaze back to Ash and shrugged.

“You called it,” he said quietly. “So, uh, how do I . . . ?” He let the question trail off as he tipped his head toward the portable crib set up next to the bed.

Ash huffed a soft laugh. “Very, very carefully.”

Cass rolled his eyes, which made Ash smile again, and then he gathered his legs up underneath him and stood—very, very carefully. Bri sighed again but didn’t wake, and together, Cass and Ash got her settled into her crib with her octopus stuffie. Just like they had earlier in the day, the two of them stood there for a moment over her crib, watching her sleep. This time, however, Ash didn’t tense up or start trembling and breathing too fast, and Cass didn’t have to lead him down the hallway, supporting him as they went and hoping that he hadn’t done or said anything wrong or triggering or in some other way ruined their weekend. This time, Ash moved closer until their shoulders were touching, and his hand tentatively slipped into Cass’s, their fingers lacing together as though it were the easiest and most natural thing in the world.

It felt amazing.

Cass blew out a short breath and squeezed Ash’s hand gently. Ash squeezed back. Then, silently, they left the room together, Ash flipping off the light switch on their way. They left the door cracked a couple of inches

and then continued down the hallway, pausing in front of Cass's open bedroom door. Cass turned to face Ash fully and took Ash's other hand, lowering his eyes to watch their fingers thread together. He smiled.

"Maybe . . . coffee? And then we can just"—he shook his head once—"I dunno, talk or something?"

"Sounds perfect," Ash agreed.

Cass nodded, but neither of them moved for several seconds. Cass actually wasn't sure he could. Ash's eyes had him entranced, lost in their deep blue beauty. He inhaled a long breath and then shook his head again, swallowing hard.

"What?" Ash asked, his voice barely a whisper and his smile almost teasing.

"Ah, it's . . . it's nothing." Cass blinked and tightened his hands around Ash's. "I'm just happy you're here."

Ash's cheeks flushed, and he dropped his chin with a small nod. "Me too."

"Should we go have some disappointingly mediocre coffee?" Cass said.

Ash laughed quietly and nodded again. "Yeah."



"NO WAY, THAT'S NOT—"

"It *is*."

"Really, now? Then what does it mean? And more importantly, how the hell do you pronounce it?"

Cass snorted a laugh, then covered his mouth, a little too late to hold in the sound. "It's, ahm"—he cleared his throat—"the larval form of some types of decapods, and—"

"Decapods?" Ash raised his eyebrows.

"Crabs."

Ash pursed his lips and eyed Cass skeptically. "And you know this, *how*?"

"Years of trying to beat my mom at Scrabble," Cass said with a shrug. "Which is funny, because it's not really even worth that much unless you play on a Triple Word or Triple Letter space."

"Like you so conveniently have here."

“Indeed.”

“And it’s pronounced . . . ?”

“Well, that I’m not sure,” Cass admitted, still holding back more laughter. He pulled out his phone. “If you want, I can look it up. Zoe . . . Zoe-ay? Hmm . . .”

“Go on, I’ll wait.” With a silly grin, Ash sat back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest.

Cass let out a dramatic sigh and unlocked his phone. “Alright, let’s see . . . Z-O-E-A-E . . .”

He turned the volume up just enough on his phone and played back the first hit on his search for *how to pronounce zoeae*. Ash leaned in as the computerized voice announced, “Zoeae,” pronounced like *zo-ee-ee*.

They both scrunched up their faces in confusion and then broke out in muffled laughter. Ash recovered first, glancing over toward the closed door to Cass’s bedroom as he shook his head.

“I hope we’re not keeping your parents up,” he said, grimacing.

Cass shook his head. “Nah, the only thing that wakes my dad up is his own snoring, and once my mom falls asleep, she usually doesn’t wake up, either.”

“I’m the opposite, unfortunately.” Ash picked up the pencil they’d been using to keep score and started tallying the points for Cass’s word.

“You don’t sleep well?” Cass asked with a frown. He scooted back a bit until he was leaning against the headboard of his bed.

Ash shrugged. “I used to. But now I don’t really anymore. Not since Bri came to live with me. She makes little noises when she sleeps. And I . . . worry.” Ash groaned. “Forty-eight points? I think. Ugh. There’s no beating you after that, especially not with the letters I have right now. I think I should forfeit. You win.”

Cass was still hung up on Ash saying he had trouble sleeping, but since Ash clearly wanted to move the conversation on to another topic, he pushed the worry to the back of his mind and straightened up. “That would be a first,” he admitted with a chuckle. “My mom was unbeatable, really. Honestly, she probably still would be. We haven’t played in a long time, though.”

Together, they cleaned up the game, musing over some of the other interesting words they’d managed to play. Then Cass disappeared out into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with a glass of water for each

of them. Ash took his with a nod of thanks, and they both settled back on the bed, sitting cross-legged facing each other, as they had been for the last couple of hours.

They should be winding down, saying good night, heading to bed. It was well after eleven, and Ash had had a long day. But Ash seemed as reluctant as Cass to let the day end, and so, after a moment, Cass set his water down on the nightstand and said, “I have plans for tomorrow.”

Ash’s eyes narrowed, though his smile brightened. “Oh?”

“Yeah.” Cass dropped his eyes to his hands. “So, in the morning, I thought we’d—”

“Wait,” Ash interrupted, and when Cass glanced back up, Ash was biting his lip. It was perfectly adorable. “Maybe, uh, don’t tell me?” he said.

Cass huffed a quiet laugh. “Don’t tell you?”

“Yeah,” Ash said with a shrug. “I mean . . . I mean, surprise me?”

“Surprise you?”

Ash nodded, still looking incredibly adorable and sweet.

The fullness in Cass’s chest felt so good and so warm, and he wanted to do it—he wanted to finally give into the tug he’d been fighting all evening, the one begging for more. More touch, more intimacy. Hand-holding. A hug. A . . . kiss.

Something told him, however, that he should wait until Ash showed he was really ready.

So instead, Cass just smiled softly and nodded. “Okay, yeah. I can do that.”

Ash smiled in return and then lowered his eyes to the drink in his hands, his fingers tapping the glass. “I should probably get to bed. Bri usually wakes up early, around six. Sometimes earlier.”

“Not a problem.” Cass started to scoot to the edge of the bed. “Here, I’ll take that for you,” he offered when his feet hit the floor.

Ash scooted right up next to him, so close he could feel Ash’s body heat and smell the faint scent of vanilla and pine. His heart beat harder, but he forced himself to reach out for Ash’s glass. It was inevitable, wasn’t it? That their fingers would touch? That the most pleasant, warm tingle would shoot up Cass’s spine? That he’d be momentarily unable to breathe?

Ash’s cheeks reddened, and he dipped his chin but didn’t let go of the glass. And all that resolve Cass had had to take it slow, to let Ash make the next move, was suddenly put to the test. He swallowed hard and waited, his

fingers resting gently over Ash’s on the glass. It was several seconds later when Ash lifted his chin back up, his eyes flickering with uncertainty as they lingered on Cass’s lips.

Cass swallowed again.

“Ash . . .”

“Hmm?”

Cass let his fingers caress over the back of Ash’s, though he didn’t otherwise answer. And Ash scooted a little closer and lowered their hands holding the glass to set on his thigh. Then he lifted his other hand, and his fingers brushed along Cass’s jawline in some exploratory, light touch, before coming to rest on Cass’s neck. Cass sat perfectly still and took a slow, deep breath, watching the emotions flitting across Ash’s face.

Eagerness and curiosity. Hesitation. Wonder. And then more of that uncertainty.

Ash looked up at him, finally, briefly. Then his eyes fell back to Cass’s lips, and he leaned in.

Cass didn’t hesitate to meet him.

The kiss was short, sweet, gentle. Just Ash’s lips, warm and soft, touching his, moving in a tentative caress.

It was perfect.

And it was over much too fast.

Cass let out a quiet whimper when Ash pulled back, and with a weak huff of a laugh, Ash dropped his hand from Cass’s neck. Cass opened his eyes as the bed shifted. Ash was looking down again, a small smile on his lips and his cheeks bright red.

“I hope that was okay,” Ash mumbled, risking a glance back up.

Cass nodded and tightened his hand slightly over Ash’s on the glass, which was still sitting on Ash’s thigh. “Yeah, it was.”

Ash nodded and then swallowed and lowered his eyes again. It was so beautiful and sweet. *He* was so beautiful and sweet.

Cass took the glass out of Ash’s hand, twisted to set it on the nightstand behind him, and then lifted his hand up to touch Ash’s cheek this time. His thumb brushed slowly along Ash’s skin, the sensation sending an intense jolt of warmth through him.

He let out a short breath and then tipped his forehead to rest against Ash’s, closing his eyes.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he murmured, his thumb still caressing gently back and forth along Ash’s cheek.

“Yeah.”

“And I’ll surprise you.”

“Yeah.”

Cass smiled again, and he shifted to press his lips against Ash’s cheek. Then he whispered, “Good night, Ash.” And he straightened up and let his hand drop.

Ash nodded. “Good night, Cass.” The tentative smile on his face lit up with what had to be hope or joy or something happy and promising, and god, it was just *beautiful*.

Ash stood slowly, gave Cass one more small smile, and then turned and left the bedroom.

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*Shaina (Saturday, November 26, 2022 – 6:13 a.m.):* What do you mean you “don’t kiss and tell”???

*Shaina (6:13 a.m.):* NO WAYYYYYYYYY

*Shaina (6:13 a.m.):* ASH!!!!!!!!!

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# Chapter Thirty-Three

## Ash

ASH STOOD IN THE entryway to the kitchen, his heart doing things he really hadn't expected it to be doing. Good things. But also scary things.

Over at the counter, Bri giggled and dropped a second handful of blueberries into a large mixing bowl as Cass counted.

"Great job! That's two. Can you do two more handfuls?"

"Da! Boo-behs! Boo-behs!" Bri agreed, leaning over from where she was settled on Cass's hip to grab another handful of blueberries from the container sitting on the counter. Cass held her carefully and encouraged her as she added another *several* handfuls of blueberries and then helped him mix them into the pancake batter already in the bowl.

"Bri, thank you so much for your help! I'm going to cook these now, but you know what I also have for you?"

"Da-da-da?"

Cass grinned at her nonsense babble and glanced up across the room at Ash. When their eyes met, that feeling in Ash's heart only intensified. "So, I got you some *strawberries*, and they're in a bowl in the fridge. Would you like to eat some while I finish the pancakes and eggs?" Cass seemed reluctant, but he pulled his eyes away from Ash and lowered his gaze back to Bri, who looked positively gleeful.

"Stah-behs?"

"That's right."

Bri bounced up and down on Cass's hip, clapping, and squealed, "Yay yay yay!"

Ash finally convinced his feet to move, and he joined Cass and Bri at the kitchen table, where they got Bri settled into the high chair Cass had borrowed from a neighbor. Cass then pulled a bowl full of cut-up strawberries out of the fridge, portioned some out onto a separate plate, and set it in front of Bri, who predictably clapped and giggled and then picked up one of the berries and shoved it into her mouth.

Cass's hand set low on Ash's back. "It'll take a few more minutes for me to cook up the pancakes and eggs, if you wanna have a seat," he said softly.

Ash dipped his chin. "Sure, yeah. Thank you."

Cass only answered by pressing his hand into Ash's back while pulling out the chair at the table next to Bri's high chair. "Coffee?" he asked as Ash sat.

Ash nodded. "That would be great, thanks."

Cass let his hand linger on Ash's shoulder for a second before heading back around to the other side of the island. He did everything: prepared Ash's coffee, brought Bri over a small plastic cup of milk and then more strawberries when she finished the ones he'd given her, cooked a whole huge stack of blueberry pancakes and a large dish of scrambled eggs, set the table, and served the food. All the while, he talked easily, switching between addressing Ash and babbling adorably with Bri.

About ten minutes later, when Cass finally took a seat next to Ash, set down his own mug of coffee, and started piling pancakes and eggs on his plate, the conversation lulled a bit, and they ate. Ash helped Bri by cutting up a large pancake into small pieces and spooning out a little bit of the scrambled eggs onto her plate. Then, as she shoved a handful of eggs into her mouth, grinning, Ash started in on his own food.

"So," Cass said after another few minutes, settling back in his chair. He took a sip of coffee and then continued. "In the spirit of surprising you, as you requested, while making sure we're prepared for the weather and the day and all—" Ash snorted a laugh and then shook his head, and Cass grinned but continued. "We should leave soonish, and dress warm in layers. Be prepared with whatever Bri needs to be out until sometime after lunch-ish. And then, uh, if you're feeling comfortable with my parents watching her tonight, we can go out just the two of us later."

“Two! Two! Two!” Bri giggled and clapped, sending a tiny bit of scrambled egg flying toward Ash. It landed on his cheek. He grimaced and scrunched his eyes closed with a groan.

Cass’s deep laugh rumbled from his other side. “Here, let me . . .”

Warm skin brushed against Ash’s cheek, wiping away the egg.

“There we go.”

“Ah beh-uh!”

Ash laughed and opened his eyes again, glancing over at Cass, who had a soft, kind smile on his lips.

*Lips that Ash had kissed last night.*

The memory came flooding back to him, as it had several times already this morning, and heat rushed to his cheeks, forcing him to drop his eyes.

“Thank you,” he mumbled. He tipped his head toward the table and added, “Thank you for all of this, actually.”

He wished he had better words to articulate exactly what he meant and exactly how much he appreciated everything Cass had done for him. The cooking, the planning, the prep, the help with Bri . . . He hadn’t *ever* felt this cared for or pampered, and he’d only been here not even a full day yet. In some ways, it was overwhelming, like so much of this trip had been. But it was also a huge relief, a weight off his shoulders, not having to be responsible for *everything*, even if just for a little while.

Cass’s hand settled on Ash’s, and he gave a light squeeze. “I’m happy to,” he said.

“I know.” Again, Ash wanted to say more, to explain himself. But the words wouldn’t come, and so, instead, he pulled his hand away from under Cass’s, took a sip of his coffee, and then changed the topic. “Oh, uh, and yes, I’m fine with it if your parents are able to watch Bri for us. That would be really great.”

When he looked back up, Cass was smiling with an eagerness that sent a tingle of heat all the way down to Ash’s toes. He swallowed hard and blinked back the feeling.

“They adore her,” Cass said gently. “Just like I do.”

Ash could only nod in response, and thankfully, Bri chose that moment to slap both of her hands down on her plate, sending more bits of scrambled egg and a few pancake crumbs flying onto Ash and the table. They both laughed, and this time, Cass handed Ash a napkin to clean up.

Just as they finished eating, Cass's parents joined them at the table. Ash greeted them, as did Bri in her usual exuberant manner, and then Ash excused himself and Bri to go get ready to leave while Cass grabbed some more plates from the cupboard for his parents.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, ASH sat with Bri in his lap on a low rock wall in the aviary at Turtle Bay Exploration Park. Wonder and more of that deep sense of contentedness surrounded him as he watched Bri stare in awe at a colorful lorikeet that landed only inches away, on Cass's hand. The green-and-yellow bird, whose name was Orbit according to the small metal band on its foot, chirped and then dipped its head to eat some bird food from the little plastic cup Cass held. Bri's gorgeous blue eyes grew wider.

"Burr?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper. Both of her hands came up to her cheeks. "Wow, burr."

"Yeah, pretty bird, huh?" Ash said, and Bri nodded, her eyes still huge.

"Pwee burr. Cass burr," she murmured. The bird chirped again, and she giggled, then quickly covered her mouth with both hands. "Shh, shh, burr." She pointed at it and looked back at Ash. "Un-ca Ash, see burr?"

"I do, sweet girl."

It was amazing, seeing Bri so happy and enthralled. Everything Cass had planned for them so far had been like this—first their walk through the McConnell Arboretum and Botanical Gardens, then the hour or so Bri had spent running around and playing at Babe's Corral Playground, and now this. And like everywhere they'd been so far today, the aviary, called the Parrot Playhouse, was busy, full of kids with their grownups and even a few older couples there without children. Everyone was doing just what they were—laughing with wonder at the small, colorful birds perching on their arms, shoulders, and even heads.

Yet to Ash, it seemed like the three of them were the only ones in the whole world, here together in their little bubble where everything was bright and happy and joyful.

Cass carefully moved his hand closer to Bri as the bird ate out of the small cup. He smiled very softly and said, "Isn't this amazing? Do you like the birds, Bri?"

Bri leaned a little closer and whispered, “Da, burr,” still completely in awe. She looked back at Ash. “Me burr?” she asked, pointing to her chest. “Me?”

Ash smiled and nodded. “Let’s see what we can do, okay?”

She grinned again but sat very, very still. After a brief discussion, Ash took the small cup of nectar from Cass. The bird that had been on Cass’s hand promptly jumped to Ash’s, and he laughed lightly at the odd sensation and shook his head. Then, Cass helped Bri move her arm up right next to Ash’s hand until the bird had no option but to hop onto Bri’s arm.

Bri let out a squeal when the bird landed on her, its toes curling into her heavy coat. Thankfully, the noise and the slight jerk of her arm as she steadied herself didn’t scare away the determined little beast. It hopped again so it was closer to Ash’s hand and then continued eating. Bri’s mouth was glued shut, her eyes as wide as saucers, and she looked up at Cass and then back at Ash before focusing on the bird again.

Another bird flew over, landing on Cass’s shoulder, and then another landed on Ash’s head, and Bri finally laughed loud enough to scare them all away. The nectar in the cup was gone anyway. So, slowly, the three of them stood and exited the aviary, dropping the cup in the recycle bin on the way out. Cass jogged back around to the entrance and grabbed Bri’s diaper bag, and then he met up with Ash and Bri again.

After lunch at a bistro near the park’s entrance, Cass led them the short distance back across the Sundial Bridge to a trail outside of the botanical gardens and arboretum. Bri was beside herself with excitement when they found a pond with a variety of different types of turtles, but as soon as they sat down together on a small bench in the shade of a tall tree next to the pond, her eyes started to droop, and in no time at all, she was fast asleep, slumped against Ash’s chest.

Ash laughed quietly. “I guess it’s been quite the day for her. It is about time for her nap.”

Cass reached over and, with the gentlest touch, brushed Bri’s hair back off her forehead. “Tired, precious girl,” he said softly.

Ash nodded and then held his breath as Cass scooted closer and lifted his arm up to rest around Ash’s shoulders.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

It most definitely *was* okay. More than okay, even. And so, Ash replied, “Yeah, it’s okay.” He let himself lean into Cass slightly, closed his eyes, and

took a deep breath.

How was this all so good?

Ever since last night, since he'd sort of given himself permission to enjoy what little time he and Cass had together, every moment had felt better than the last, starting with their kiss right before they'd said good night and continuing through to now. He had no previous experience and no reference for any of this; all he knew was that he hadn't felt even close to this at peace and comfortable in at least a year now.

Cass squeezed his shoulders, and warm lips softly grazed his temple. Ash sighed contentedly.

"I hope you had a good time so far," Cass said quietly. "It seems like Bri did."

"Oh, she definitely had the best day ever," Ash agreed.

"And you?" There was a tiny bit of uncertainty in Cass's voice, and Ash smiled, opened his eyes, and tilted his head until he could see his friend.

"Eh. It's been okay," he said with a teasing smirk.

Cass's eyes lit up, their deep brown full of the same adoration Ash couldn't believe he kept seeing. He blinked and looked down at Bri, who still slept soundly and peacefully in his arms. Then he leaned into Cass again and smiled.

"I also think it's the best day I've had in a very, very long time," he admitted.

Cass hummed what sounded like a quiet agreement, and then he rested his forehead against the side of Ash's head. "Me too." Cass's lips brushed against Ash's cheek, the touch as soft and careful as any other.

It was more of the same. More contentedness and tranquility. More softness. More quiet comfort. Ash just wanted to bask in it for as long as he possibly could. Because here, now, with Cass and Bri and this peacefulness they'd somehow found themselves in, everything felt less heavy, less suffocating.

And for the first time in a very long time, he could breathe.

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*Dad (Saturday, November 26, 2022 – 8:14 p.m.):* The little angel already fell asleep. I think your mom is a bit disappointed and was hoping for more time with her

*Dad (8:15 p.m.):* Have a good time

*Dad (8:17 p.m.):* You mom says good night and she loves you

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# Chapter Thirty-Four

## Cass

"ALRIGHT, SO NOW THAT we're out here on this secluded road, all alone, late at night, with *no one else* around, I think you can tell me what you planned." Ash twisted his head to glance at Cass, his eyebrows arched with an adorable playfulness. "'Surprise, I'm going to murder you'?"

Cass rolled his eyes, though he was grinning. "Nothing that exciting, I'm afraid. Here, come with me." He turned and pushed open the driver's side door to his dad's truck, and Ash followed, getting out of the truck on the passenger side.

Outside, the chilly air was still and fresh, and a dark lake stretched out down below the vista point to the west. Pitch black surrounded them, interrupted only by the light from the cab of the truck, which would shut off as soon as they both closed their doors. Above, stars twinkled in the inky sky, a vast unknown with no end.

The quiet spot only about fifteen or so miles from town was exactly what Cass had wanted for them—somewhere they could be together, just the two of them. No loud noises, no crowds, no disruptions. It certainly wasn't fancy, and hell, maybe it wasn't really even romantic, but it was one hundred percent what Cass thought they both needed.

He left the door open a few inches so the light would stay on, then headed around to the back of the truck, lowered the tailgate, and hopped up into the bed, where two huge suitcases and a cooler sat pushed up against the cab.

Ash stopped next to the tailgate. “Uh, so, what . . . ?” His question trailed off unfinished, and he looked up at Cass, confused.

Cass smiled. “Give me about two minutes here,” he said, and when Ash reluctantly nodded, Cass got to work.

He unpacked several pillows and blankets from the two suitcases and arranged them neatly in the bed, the pillows sitting up against the cab for support. Then he stepped back over to the tailgate and offered Ash a hand to help him up.

“Alright, there we go, now sit here,” he instructed once Ash was up in the bed with him.

“Okay . . .” Ash took a seat where Cass had indicated, a spot well cushioned with pillows and blankets. Then he looked up at Cass, obviously skeptical.

Cass smiled again. “Trust me.”

“I do, or I wouldn’t be here,” Ash said with a grin of his own.

Cass’s heart fluttered at the sight, and he dipped his chin. “Good,” he said. Then he half knelt and reached over to unfold one of the blankets up over Ash’s legs. “It’ll get colder, I’m sure. Are you warm enough now, though?”

Ash nodded in response. “Yeah.”

“Good.”

Cass pushed himself back to his feet and leaned over to shut the driver’s side door, extinguishing the last of the light. The darkness around them seemed awake and active, somehow, with the quiet rustling of the trees and gentle lapping of the water against the shore below. It wasn’t uncomfortable or eerie in any way. At least not to Cass. He hoped Ash felt the same.

When his eyes had adjusted enough to the darkness, he lowered himself down next to Ash and moved the cooler in front of him.

“I didn’t want to go to a movie or a busy restaurant,” Cass explained quietly, opening the cooler. He pulled out two thermoses and then two more plastic containers. “I just wanted us to have some time together, without any other distractions.”

“I like that idea,” Ash said.

Cass glanced over at him, sitting only a foot or so away. Even through the darkness, he could see Ash’s beautiful, soft smile, his eyes sparkling like the stars above them. An ache in his chest tried to tug him closer, but he valiantly ignored it and continued.

“So, uh, after a bit,” he said, “we’ll be able to see a ton of stars out here, and if we’re lucky, we’ll also be able to see the Milky Way. I guess there are a couple of meteor showers visible this time of year, too, but we’d need a telescope, and I didn’t have one.”

“Oh, wow.” Ash’s eyes were wide, and he tilted his head back for a moment and stared upward. “How long until our eyes adjust?”

“I think we’re supposed to give it a good thirty minutes,” Cass said.

Ash hummed in response and continued studying the sky, his mouth slightly parted in wonder. Cass’s heart did the same thing it had a moment ago, urging him to move closer, to wrap an arm around Ash’s shoulders and hold him tightly. And he wanted to give in, to let it happen, to ignore his brain for just a moment.

He took a long, slow breath, still watching Ash, and then he dropped his eyes back to the cooler. Dinner first, he decided. Anything else would be later. He set down the plastic containers, reached back into the cooler, and pulled out a large plastic bag containing a serving spoon, two thick paper plates, and a bundle of napkins. Next to him, Ash shifted, and when Cass looked over, he was gazing out ahead of them toward the water.

“The lake—which one is it?” Ash asked.

“Whiskeytown Lake.” Cass opened up the plastic bag and started removing the contents. “It’s much busier in the summer. We used to come here when I was a kid. There’s a spot a bit farther down the road where we’d camp. Sometimes my grandparents would visit with my uncle and bring their boat, and we’d go out on the water.”

“Fishing?”

Cass shook his head. “No, uh, they had this small speedboat, and they’d go waterskiing, tubing, that sort of thing.”

“*They’d* go?”

Cass grimaced and looked over at Ash again. Ash’s smile held a tiny bit of a tease to it, and Cass couldn’t help but roll his eyes. “Remember our conversation a while back about how I’m not a huge fan of being in deep water?” When Ash nodded, Cass continued. “Well, let’s just say this lake is the reason why.”

He stopped there, hoping to not have to tell Ash the whole story. An elbow nudged his side, however, and he knew he wasn’t getting out of it.

“Are you gonna tell me what happened, or do I have to guess?”

He laughed and shook his head. “It’s funny but also not, actually. Ah, I’ll tell you, but first . . .” Cass offered Ash one of the thermoses he’d pulled out of the cooler a few minutes ago. “Here. These both have hot tea in them—peppermint something. My mom recommended it. I honestly don’t drink hot tea much. But it seemed like a better choice than coffee.” He paused for half a second as Ash nodded. “Then I made chicken salad,” he continued, taking the top off the first container. “It’s a family recipe that uses an avocado mayo, red onion, and sun-dried tomatoes. My mom loves it. I wasn’t sure if you’d prefer to have it on a croissant or on bread, so I brought both. The bread is a locally made sourdough. I hope it’s okay.”

He knew he’d started to ramble, fueled by the bit of uncertainty he’d had over what food to pack and whether Ash would like it. But then Ash laughed lightly next to him, and Ash’s hand set on top of his, the warmth a contrast to the chilly night air.

“That sounds perfect,” Ash assured him. “I love peppermint tea, and I’ll have the sourdough.”

“Yeah, okay.” Cass swallowed and nodded. “Good, good.”

He cleared his throat and began preparing their sandwiches—a bit of a challenge in the darkness—as he told the story of why he wasn’t a huge fan of swimming in deep water. It really wasn’t anything that had *seemed* traumatic at the time—just an incident one summer out on the lake where one of his cousins, who was ten years older than him, had been goofing around on the boat and had fallen into the water. Nothing else had happened; his cousin had been wearing a life vest, and they’d pulled him back up, and everything had been fine.

The bad part was what his brain had concocted afterward, making him imagine all the things that *could have happened*.

His cousin could have hit his head on the way down.

He could have *not* been wearing the life vest.

He could have drowned.

No one else had even thought twice about it. Cass, however, had been reluctant to go out on the boat every summer after that and had eventually started staying on shore with his mom while the rest of the family went out.

“It’s not a debilitating fear or anything, either,” Cass clarified. “Just an unease, I guess.” He set Ash’s plate with his chicken salad sandwich in front of him. “Whenever the water is deep enough that I can’t touch the ground standing up or if it’s dark or murky, I’m just kinda uncomfortable enough

that I don’t have fun. I’m good watching other people swim, or when I’m swimming in a shallow pool or very close to the shore, where it’s not deep.”

Ash shifted a little to face Cass and then picked up his sandwich. “So,” he said with a smirk, “when you come visit me up in Seattle, I should *not* plan for us to go out kayaking.”

The realization that Ash was already thinking about *next time*, when Cass might come visit him in Seattle again, caught Cass off guard. He tried to ignore the little flutter of hope and happiness that rolled through him, but his grin grew wider nonetheless.

“Ahh, it would *definitely* be preferable for us to stay on the shore,” he admitted. Then he distracted himself by setting the top of his croissant on his own sandwich, closing the containers, and starting to put them back into the cooler. “*But*,” he continued, “if it’s something you really want to do, like I said, it’s not awful for me. Just uncomfortable.”

“Can you go in a pool if you stay in the shallow end? Without feeling uncomfortable, I mean?”

“Yeah, that’s really not too much of a problem.”

“Alright, cool.” When Cass narrowed his eyes at Ash, Ash just shrugged. “Just cataloguing for later.”

“Later?”

“Yeah.” Ash grinned again but didn’t say anything else, and that feeling of hope burst to life in Cass’s chest again.

*Later.*

*Later* also implied *next time*, which further confirmed Ash was already thinking about the future. And Cass really, *really* hoped that was true.

Cass quickly looked down at his sandwich, overwhelmed by everything he was feeling and had been feeling all weekend so far, and he distracted himself, *again*, by copying Ash and digging into dinner.

The sandwiches were perfect, and Ash made sure to let Cass know that several times. They chatted, jumping from topic to topic as they tended to do. They talked a lot about their childhoods and how they’d grown up. They talked about good memories and steered away from the not-so-good ones. And when they’d finished eating, Cass packed their used plates and the extra food back up in the cooler, moved the cooler out of the way, and cautiously but eagerly scooted closer to Ash in the bed of the truck.

Ash didn’t even seem to hesitate at all. He shifted over to close the remaining distance between them and then took Cass’s hand and lifted

Cass's arm up behind him to rest on his shoulders.

They were both quiet for a bit after that, just staring up at the stars.

"There are so many," Ash said a few minutes later, the awe in his voice clear. "And that's gotta be a planet there, right?" He pointed to the east, toward a particularly bright, orangish-colored dot in the sky.

"Yeah. That's Mars, and I think . . ." Cass scanned the sky and then nodded. "Yeah, so there"—he lifted his free hand to point to the south—"is Jupiter. The really bright one. And then I think we're supposed to be able to see Saturn near the horizon, too, but maybe it's not dark enough yet."

Ash leaned closer to him as though trying to follow the direct line of Cass's arm, but he said nothing and then let his head fall to rest against Cass's. It was perfect. All of it. The closeness and intimacy, the softness.

It was what he'd wanted, what he'd been searching for. But he'd never come even close to finding this before. Not until now. Not until Ash.

He breathed a soft sigh and closed his eyes, letting himself relax. Ash's warm body stayed pressed up against his, and when Ash's hand settled on his thigh under the blanket, Cass felt something else that'd always been lacking too.

*Arousal.*

He didn't fight it, though he also didn't act on it. He just closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and let himself feel the growing ache and longing building up low in his body.

Ash's hand shifted, pressing into his thigh a bit more. Cass had to hold back a groan.

"Ahhh, I *can* see it," Ash said, sitting up straighter.

"Hmm?" Cass blinked his eyes open slowly, still distracted.

"The Milky Way. Just barely, but it's there, yeah?" Ash pulled his hand away from Cass's thigh and swept his arm from the west to the east across the sky. "Is that it? Can you see too?"

It took Cass a second to reorient himself, but then he searched the sky where Ash had indicated, and he shook his head in amazement. It was faint—just a hint of a cloudy band stretching across the sky—but obvious enough. "Yeah, I can. Wow."

"It's beautiful," Ash said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "It must be huge, huh?"

Cass nodded in agreement and swallowed hard as Ash's hand settled back on his thigh. "I remember reading that all the stars we can see in the

sky are within the Milky Way Galaxy. The nearest is Promixa Centauri, but I don't think we can see it. The brightest is Sirius, but—"

He frowned, trying to recall the information he'd looked up a few nights ago when he'd started planning this outing. Thinking was much, much too difficult right now, though, especially when Ash's hand drifted slightly higher on Cass's thigh.

"Sirius, hmm . . ." Ash trailed off for a moment and leaned into Cass again. "I kinda want to take my phone out and look it up, but then if I do, I feel like we'll have to start the clock over and let our eyes adjust again."

"You're probably right. I feel like it was supposed to be clearly visible to the south. Or the southeast. But not until later, a couple hours, maybe."

"Can we identify any others without having to look things up?" Ash asked, resting his head back against Cass's again. "I mean, I can see Orion's Belt there. What's that orangish one?"

Glad for the distraction—and that he actually *remembered* this one—Cass grinned. "That's Betelgeuse. It's part of Orion, his shoulder, actually. And then Rigel there . . ."

He continued on, pointing out another couple of stars in that constellation and then giving Ash a summary of the myths and lore he remembered about how the Milky Way had gotten its name. Ash asked some questions, most of which Cass couldn't answer, and they agreed to file them away until later, when they could look the information up.

They talked more, mostly about constellations and what they knew and didn't know, but also about family and holidays and random things. Another hour or more easily passed, and when they fell back into silence a while later, the night chill seemed to deepen. Cass knew it had to be well after ten, maybe even close to eleven.

He slowly searched the sky again and then nodded. "Ah, there's Sirius," he said, pointing with his free hand to a spot a little above the horizon to the southeast, where a bright bluish-whitish star twinkled.

Ash hummed and twisted his head to follow in the direction Cass was pointing. "Ah, yep, I see it. And—"

A burst of light popped in the sky, and a bright white streak shot up in a wide arc, tail streaming along behind it until the light fizzled out and disappeared. Cass's heart thudded in his chest, and Ash's hand drifted higher on Cass's thigh again as he sat up a little.

"Did you see that?" Ash asked in awe.

“Yeah. Yeah, I did,” Cass confirmed.

Ash huffed a quiet laugh and then shook his head before resting back against Cass. “Make a wish, yeah?”

Cass swallowed hard, and, his heart still pounding, he reached up and touched Ash’s chin. Ash turned to look at him, his smile soft and filled with wonder. It was so, so beautiful.

Something fluttered in his chest, and Cass finally couldn’t hold back any longer. He knew exactly what he wanted to wish for, and he had it right there. Right in front of him.

He brushed his thumb gently across Ash’s lips in a silent question of consent. And when Ash pursed his lips and nodded, Cass let his hand drift lower to cup Ash’s cheek. He leaned in slowly, his arm tightening around Ash’s shoulders, and Ash met him partway.

Their lips touched softly at first, as tentative as their kiss the previous night. This time, however, neither of them pulled away. They moved together, their lips caressing and exploring, and it was somehow warm and soft and tender but also sure and intense. Cass moaned—a sound he *knew* he’d never made before—and then he felt Ash smile into him.

For whatever reason, that was about as much as he could take right then.

He broke the kiss, panting as he tipped his head forward to rest against Ash’s. Ash let out a weak laugh.

“Was that your wish?” Ash asked breathlessly.

But Cass couldn’t answer. His heart was still racing, his chest was on fire, and his lips tingled in the most amazing way. He somehow managed a nod and then closed the gap between them again, his lips easily finding Ash’s in the darkness.

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*Grant (Saturday, November 26, 2022 – 11:01 p.m.):* Yo dude remind me what time I’m picking you up from the airport tomorrow

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# Chapter Thirty-Five

## Ash

IT HAD TO BE fire. Searing-hot liquid fire racing through his veins. That was the only possible explanation for the burn Ash felt spreading through his body.

Their kiss—or kiss*es* or whatever all of this was—continued and deepened, their lips dancing in tandem. Cass let out the softest whimper as he slanted his mouth against Ash's, sending another jolt through him. It was all heat and this intense pulse of need, and it was new and heady and hot.

And it quickly pushed beyond any boundaries he thought he'd given himself, both in terms of the speed at which this relationship between them was growing and the level of intimacy he'd expected from the night.

Not that he was going to complain about either of those.

He groaned and lifted his hand up, pressing it into the middle of Cass's chest. Cass's heart thrummed underneath his palm, the rhythm uneven and rapid, mimicking his own. That knowledge certainly didn't help his predicament any.

In fact, it almost made it worse, knowing Cass was likely feeling *all* the same things Ash was.

He pulled away, finally, only when he realized how much he needed to breathe, and he groaned again, dropping his forehead to Cass's shoulder.

"Sorry," Cass whispered, his breaths coming in short puffs. Lips grazed Ash's temple. "Was that too much?"

“No. Yes. Maybe.” Ash shook his head. “I mean, no. No, it wasn’t, it—” Still breathing hard, Ash turned his head slightly, though he still leaned into Cass, and he brought his hand up from Cass’s chest to his cheek. He shook his head again and then stretched up to kiss Cass’s lips once more. Briefly this time. “Not too much,” he repeated before lowering his forehead back to Cass’s shoulder.

“Good.”

Cass’s arms tightened around Ash, and they stayed there like that for what had to be several minutes, catching their breaths. The embrace, too, felt just as incredible as their kisses had—reassuring in its softness and certainty. He smiled and buried his head deeper into the crook of Cass’s shoulder with a sigh that released all of his remaining tension.

“You’re the first person I’ve ever kissed,” Ash admitted quietly, though he was mostly sure Cass already knew.

Cass nodded into him, confirming his suspicions. “You’re the first person I’ve ever wanted to *keep* kissing,” Cass murmured. And again, Cass’s lips brushed against his temple with a featherlight touch that sent another rush of sweet, hot fire through Ash’s veins.

He shivered, which seemed contradictory—he was too warm if anything—and then he closed his eyes and cuddled up in Cass’s arms.

Another few minutes passed before Cass shifted slightly and cleared his throat. “It’s late,” he said, though Ash could clearly hear the reluctance in his voice.

Ash nodded into him again but didn’t move. He knew it was late. He knew they should get back. But for once, he wanted to be a little selfish for a little while. He wanted to stay right here, in this place that somehow felt so comfortable and safe. And for once, he wanted to pretend, for just a few more minutes, that he had no responsibilities, no devastating grief pulling him under at every opportunity, no suffocating weight sitting heavily on his shoulders.

He pressed his hand into Cass’s chest. “Five more minutes?” he said. “Then we can go.”

“Of course.” Cass’s hand smoothed gently down his back and settled above his waist. “Whatever you want.”

Ash smiled. “Thank you.”

Probably closer to ten minutes later, Ash finally sat up, the chill from the night air hitting him as soon as he was no longer curled against Cass.

They kissed again, although it stayed brief and light, and then Cass insisted Ash get back into the cab while he cleaned up the pillows and blankets in the truck's bed.

Ash didn't argue, although he promised himself he'd thank Cass with another kiss later, and he climbed out of the bed carefully and got settled in the passenger seat while Cass started stuffing the suitcases.

They didn't talk much on the drive back to Cass's house, though Ash kept his fingers threaded through Cass's the whole way. When they pulled up into the driveway not long after, Cass shut off the engine and then lifted Ash's hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to Ash's knuckles.

It seemed the perfect way to end the perfect evening.

The porch light cast a dim yellowish glow, but Ash could clearly see the color in Cass's cheeks as he lowered Ash's hand back down, his thumb caressing gently across Ash's skin.

"I hope you had a good time," Cass said almost shyly.

Ash smiled and squeezed Cass's hand. "I did, yeah."

"Good enough that we can, I dunno, do it again sometime?"

Thinking about the future was hard, and talking about it was even harder. He'd been working a lot all day long to stay in the present—not letting himself dwell on the past or worry about the future. But this question was an easy one, and even if his feelings and anxieties and guilt were all a lot and all threatening to pull him back down into that bad place he'd been in only a little more than a week ago, he was in a good enough place right now that he could promise Cass a next time.

And so, he nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, we can do that," he said.

Cass's eyes and smile lit up, bright and joyful, and he lifted Ash's hand again, kissed Ash's knuckles, and said, "Perfect. Thank you."

Ash shook his head. There was no need to thank him. Cass was the amazing man here. Every single moment they'd spent together, Cass had been *there*, present and thoughtful and kind, always anticipating what Ash needed, always making Ash feel special and important, like he cared.

He was easily the sweetest, kindest, most understanding person Ash had ever met. And he was funny and smart, and god, he was handsome, too.

Everything, really. He was everything.

Ash closed his eyes and ducked his chin. "We should probably go inside? I hope Bri was good for your parents."

"I'm sure she was a perfect angel."

They unloaded the suitcases into the garage (Cass promised he'd take care of them tomorrow), and then Cass carried the cooler in one hand and held Ash's hand with his other as they headed up the walkway to the front door. The light was on in the living room, dimmed by the curtains covering the front windows, but the porch was brightly lit, and when they paused at the door, Cass set down the cooler and turned to face Ash fully. In the light, Ash could clearly see every emotion dancing across Cass's face—joy and adoration, hope and happiness. His optimism and positivity were beautiful things that somehow gave Ash strength.

Ash smiled softly and lifted both hands to frame Cass's face. The roughness of the thin stubble from Cass's beard was suddenly arousing as hell, although Ash had barely noticed it earlier. He swallowed hard and watched as his fingers ran across Cass's skin. Then he bit at his lower lip and raised his eyes to meet Cass's.

Everything he was feeling was reflected there.

He released a shuddering breath and cleared his throat. "Thank you again for tonight. It was amazing."

Cass nodded in agreement, and they silently came together in another kiss that deepened briefly. He smiled into it, which made Cass smile, and then they kissed one more time. When they finally separated, they didn't go far. Cass leaned forward slightly so their foreheads touched, and his hands settled low on Ash's back, at that spot just below his waist. Ash closed his eyes and sighed.

For a fleeting second, he wondered if maybe the night didn't have to end quite yet. He imagined Cass taking his hand, leading them silently into Cass's room, closing the door behind them. Then he imagined Cass's fingers inching up under his sweater, teasing along his skin. He imagined Cass gently lowering him onto the bed, settling on top of him, kissing his lips and then tracing a path down his throat. All while Cass's hands—

A warm breath brushed against his cheek. "Mmm, ready to go in?"

Ash almost laughed. "Not really," he admitted, lifting his chin. Cass's amused eyes stared back at him.

"Not really?"

Ash dropped his gaze to where his hands rested on Cass's chest, and that whole imagined scenario replayed in his mind, only this time, it was *him* leading them into the bedroom, *him* sneaking his fingers under Cass's

clothes, *him* crawling on top of Cass and kissing a trail along the smooth, hot skin of Cass's neck.

He sucked in a breath and watched as his hands dipped lower to settle on Cass's stomach. The thick material of Cass's sweater prevented the closeness his body was nearly screaming for.

And maybe that was a good thing.

He wasn't ready for that type of intimacy yet, anyway. Was he?

Cass swallowed hard, and his hands pressed gently but firmly into Ash's lower back, bringing their hips closer together. "Ash . . ."

He closed his eyes and shook his head. No. No, he definitely wasn't ready for that yet.

"Yeah, we should go inside now," he said quietly, and even though he believed his words, he could hear the reluctance in his voice. He shook his head again. "Sorry."

"What? No, no, no. Hey, look at me." Cass's hand touched his cheek, and Ash frowned but lifted his chin to see Cass's kind eyes smiling softly at him. "I had the best time tonight. The whole day, actually. It was all perfect. And this, too"—Cass's thumb traced Ash's cheekbone—"is just perfect." He tipped his head forward again to rest against Ash's. "Please believe me when I say that while I'd be happy for, uh, more . . . I *really* have no expectations in terms of any type of timeline regarding, uh, intimacy. Honestly." With a quiet, almost self-deprecating laugh, he said, "I'm a *very* patient man, and the last thing I expected tonight was to take you to bed . . ."

His last words trailed off like he was almost uncomfortable saying them, and that made everything Ash was thinking and feeling seem a little less awkward. Still, his cheeks heated up as he bit his lip and then said, "I was thinking about it, though." He quickly shook his head. "I'm not—I'm definitely not ready yet. But I . . . sorta wish I was, you know?"

Cass closed his eyes like maybe *he* wished Ash was, too, but when he looked at Ash again, all Ash saw was understanding, kindness, and hope. Cass leaned in and barely grazed Ash's lips in a teasing, soft kiss as his hand slid down Ash's shoulder to his elbow. "I can wait," Cass said.

The conviction in his voice made it clear Ash could believe him.

Cass tipped his head toward the house, gave Ash one more smile, and then picked up the cooler, pulled his keys out of his pocket, and unlocked the door. He motioned Ash in ahead of him, and as Ash stepped into the

entryway, warm air welcomed him. His eyes were immediately drawn into the living room, and his stomach dropped.

Cass's dad was sitting on the couch with Bri sprawled out on top of him, her head resting on his shoulder and her eyes closed in sleep. Ollie the Octopus sat on the cushion next to them.

Robert lifted his free hand and gave Ash a small wave. "Welcome back," he said quietly.

Ash grimaced and started over into the living room, a lead weight settling in his gut. "I'm so, so sorry, did she keep you up? She's usually so good at just sleeping, and I didn't think—"

Robert shook his head. "Nah, she was great. She woke up about an hour ago and was worried that you were gone. We read a book"—he motioned to the coffee table in front of him, where one of Bri's board books sat—"and she fell right back to sleep. To tell you the truth, I was pretty darn comfortable out here myself, and I didn't want to get up and try to put her back in the crib."

"Ah, well, thank you so much. I can't tell you how much I appreciate you watching her for me," Ash said, keeping his voice low as he leaned over and picked up his niece. She didn't wake, though she cuddled up in his arms with a quiet sigh.

"You're welcome. Anytime." Robert looked like he maybe wanted to say more, but he just patted his legs and pushed himself to his feet, then glanced over Ash's shoulder. "You locked up?"

"Yeah," Cass replied. "Thanks for letting me borrow the truck."

Robert didn't answer; instead, he gave a small nod to Cass and then picked up Ollie from the couch and handed the stuffie to Ash. "She definitely loves that thing," he said with a light laugh.

"She really does."

"Alright. Good night."

"Good night, Mr. Jacobs."

"Good night, Dad."

With another nod, Robert headed off toward the hallway and disappeared into the darkness. Behind Ash, Cass cleared his throat quietly.

"Good night to you and Bri, too."

Ash turned to face him, his arms tightening around Bri, and all at once, everything hit him again—every emotion, every new sensation, every want

and desire, every reservation and fear. All the guilt, too. It was an intense mix, and he couldn't breathe for half a second as it overwhelmed him.

Cass stood there in the dim light, his dark-brown eyes soft and sweet and just . . . perfect. It was *all* so new, and yet, Ash felt like he'd known Cass forever. Like they'd been friends for much, much longer than just a year. Like he could trust him. Really, *really* trust him.

Which was probably why Ash had had that fleeting thought earlier about letting Cass take him to bed.

He'd never felt like this before. Not even close.

And so he needed to make sure they didn't rush things. Because this felt good—like it really mattered—and he didn't want anything to ruin that.

He quietly stepped up to Cass and gave him a light, soft kiss, and then he whispered, "Good night, Cass. See you in the morning."

For whatever reason, that made Cass's eyes light up in the most beautiful way.

"See you in the morning," Cass echoed.

After one more kiss, which Ash hoped conveyed just how wonderful the night really had been to him, he gave Cass another smile, then tilted his head toward the hallway, turned, and headed in the direction of the guest bedroom.

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*Ash (Sunday, November 27, 2022 – 12:48 a.m.):* No! xD

*Ash (12:48 a.m.):* No, I will NOT sing it for you now

*Ash (12:49 a.m.):* For starters, there is absolutely no world in which you NEED to hear me sing, especially a song I learned a decade ago in fifth grade. Second, you're in the room down the hallway - I'm not coming down there, and I'm not going to sing right now in here while Bri is sleeping. Third, WE'RE supposed to be sleeping! Why are we still up?

*Ash (12:51 a.m.):* God, I'm going to regret this in the morning, aren't I?

*Voice message from Ash (12:53 a.m.)*

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# Chapter Thirty-Six

## Cass

THE MORNING FELT SLEEPY and slow. No one in the house woke up before seven thirty, not even Bri. In fact, Cass didn't hear a single sound come from anywhere else in the house, other than his dad's snoring, until nearly eight o'clock, when Bri's muffled babbling and giggling carried to his room from down the hall.

He'd been awake for only a little while himself, sitting up in bed, researching on his phone . . .

Flights to Seattle over the holidays in December were prohibitively expensive, especially considering Cass didn't *really* have any money since he couldn't work. He also wasn't sure when his dad was going to have time off, except on Christmas Day itself, and he wasn't sure he'd want to spend the holiday away from his mom.

That realization had made him pause for too long, contemplating *how* exactly things were going to work. A long-distance relationship—that was what they were building here. But when Cass had proposed it, he hadn't really considered what it actually meant.

Like the fact that the time they'd spent together in the last day and a half—which had been the best day and a half he could remember—had made him understand exactly how hard it would be to go days, weeks, months without getting to see Ash in person.

And the fact that he couldn't expect Ash to travel down here every time they wanted to be together. It would have to go both ways. Which would

mean he'd have to either earn some money, somehow, without really being able to have a job, or he'd have to ask his parents to let him borrow it. The former didn't seem realistic, given his responsibilities and commitment to taking care of his mom, and the latter didn't seem reasonable, at least not for any sort of long-term arrangement.

He guessed he and Ash should talk about it, but he wasn't sure he wanted to broach the subject today. Maybe—

"Shh, shh, Cass sweep?" The adorable voice came from right on the other side of his bedroom door, and Cass closed his eyes and smiled. "Cass sweep?"

"I dunno," came Ash's voice, also muffled through the door. "Let's find out, huh?"

"Da!"

"Shh, shh, quiet, remember? Cass's parents are still sleeping."

"Ohhhh, shh! Shh! Da, shh!"

Cass laughed to himself and set his phone on his nightstand just as he heard a knock on his bedroom door.

"Cass? Cass, sweep? In?"

He grinned and then said, "Hi, Bri! I'm awake. Yes, you can come in."

Without any hesitation at all, the door opened, and Bri pushed her way in, her face lit up with the widest grin. She still wore the same onesie she'd had on the night before—light blue and pink, decorated with little multicolored jellyfish—and she held her blue octopus stuffie in one hand as she toddled across the room.

"Cass! Up! Up!"

"Shh, Bri, quiet voices, remember," Ash said, but he, too, looked bright and happy, his deep blue eyes smiling. He shut the door behind him as Bri reached the bed, her arms outstretched.

"Up, pwease, up!"

Laughing, Cass pushed himself over to the edge of the bed and reached down to pick her up. She squealed with delight as he lifted her up high over his head. "Good morning, Bri!"

"Cass good!" She giggled again, even as Cass lowered her back to the bed. "Cass sweep?"

"I *was* sleeping, but now I'm awake, just like you," he said, smiling. She laughed and then crawled out of his lap and over to the window, where she pushed the curtains out of the way.

“Day! Day, up! Go!”

“Oh, are we going somewhere?” Cass arched his eyebrows in question and looked up at Ash, who sort of shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“She’s decided we’re going hiking,” Ash explained.

“Out! Out!” Bri jumped up and down at the window but then plopped down on her bum, laughing. “Boom. I faww.”

Cass snorted a laugh and shook his head. “Well, the girl has spoken. I guess we *have* to go out now.”

“We don’t have to,” Ash chided. “She doesn’t always have to get what she wants.”

“Oh, I know,” Cass agreed, twisting and reaching over to Bri. He lifted her back up and set her down on the floor in front of him. She grinned.

“Out?”

“Only if Uncle Ash agrees. I was thinking we could go on a walk—”

“Go! Go! Out!”

Cass pursed his lips to hold back another laugh, and he glanced at Ash, who still looked skeptical. He winked. “I was thinking,” he repeated, “we could go on a walk with my mom this morning. She loves to get out of the house, and it looks like it’s nice and sunny. There’s a playground a couple of blocks from here. How does that sound?”

He was asking Bri as much as he was asking Ash, though Bri’s response—happy squealing, jumping up and down, and grabbing Cass’s hand to try to pull him off the bed—was much more amusing than Ash’s simple nod in agreement.

“Okay! First, though,” Cass said, letting Bri tug him up, “we have to have breakfast, because we all need to have plenty of energy to play at the playground, right?”

“Pway, yay, yay, yay!”

“Wow, you’re going to regret this,” Ash chimed in, laughing as he stood back and watched Bri drag Cass across the room to the door. She tried to reach up and grab the handle, but she was still too small. Cass knelt down next to her and put his finger to his lips.

“Shh, we have to be quiet when we go out into the hallway, okay? My mom might still be sleeping, and she gets very tired sometimes.”

Bri’s eyes widened like she *really* understood the assignment, and she nodded seriously and put her finger to her mouth, mimicking Cass. “Shh.”

“That’s right.” Cass stood back up. “Let’s go make some breakfast, and then we’ll see if my mom wants to come with us, okay?”

Bri nodded. “Kay! Kay! Oh, shh!” Her finger flew back to her mouth, though she was also grinning and giggling. “Shh!”

Cass glanced at Ash again, but Ash shrugged.

Together, the three of them headed out down the hallway, quiet the whole time, and then into the kitchen, where Cass worked to make a simple breakfast of toasted bagels, scrambled eggs, and quartered strawberries. Not long after, Cass’s parents joined them, which delighted Bri to no end.

The rest of the morning and early afternoon was more of the same. After breakfast, they all got dressed and headed out on the short walk to the playground. Even Cass’s dad came, pushing Cass’s mom in her wheelchair while letting Bri pretend to help. Then Ash and Cass took turns pushing Bri on the swing, and Cass’s mom and dad took a bit longer walk around the pathway surrounding the park. At some point, Cass’s parents left to head back home since they had planned a lunch date with friends. And only when Bri started getting tired and a little grumpy did Ash and Cass finally make their way back to the house too.

Bri had a snack and a quick bath and then fell asleep on the couch, which gave Ash and Cass their first—and probably *only*, Cass realized—alone time for the day. Cass helped Ash get Bri comfortable in the crib, and then they retreated to the kitchen to make lunch and, Cass hoped, talk a little.

But lunch was delayed indefinitely. As was talking.

Because as soon as they were alone in the kitchen, Ash took Cass’s hands and moved them to his waist, then wrapped his arms up around Cass’s neck and tugged Cass’s mouth down to his. They kissed long and slow and tenderly, right there in his parents’ kitchen. And it was somehow even better than it had been last night and the night before that.

“Mmm, I’ve been wanting to do this all day,” Ash admitted between kisses. He shuffled them backward until Cass was stopped by the counter, and then Ash’s hands slid down to rest low on Cass’s chest.

Cass groaned. “You should have done it sooner,” he mumbled against Ash’s mouth.

Ash laughed and then pulled back for a second, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “When? While we were eating breakfast with *your parents*? Or when we were pushing Bri on the swings? Or maybe when we were

walking home from the park and passed that group of kids riding their bikes?”

“Any of those times. Or all of them.” Cass grinned and lowered his mouth to Ash’s again. His hands slipped around to Ash’s back, where they seemed to fit perfectly, and he gently pressed Ash into him as his tongue peeked out of his mouth to run along Ash’s lower lip.

The quietest whimper rumbled in Ash’s throat, the sound sparking a new burst of heat that rushed through Cass like a wildfire. He repeated the motion with his tongue, this time a little more insistently, and Ash’s mouth opened for him for the first time.

Cass tasted him, and Ash reciprocated, their tongues dancing together with a gentle, exploratory playfulness. All the little sounds escaping Ash continued to feed the heat growing in Cass’s chest and lower, and when Ash pulled back a few minutes later, breathing hard, Cass almost welcomed the reprieve.

Ash rested his forehead against Cass’s. “Wow.”

“Yeah,” Cass agreed, unable to say anything more. He loosened his arms from around Ash, though Ash didn’t put any distance between them. If anything, he only pressed himself up against Cass more as his hands slid up to Cass’s neck again.

“Is it—” Ash started but then turned his head away, dropping it to Cass’s shoulder with a groan.

Cass brushed a soft kiss along Ash’s temple and let one hand rub up and down Ash’s back. “Is it what?” he asked gently.

Ash seemed to hesitate for a second before straightening up, his cheeks flushed and his eyes unfocused. He shook his head but then said, “Is it always this . . . good?”

“Is it always—oh, uh . . . no.” Cass let his hands find Ash’s hips. “I mean, not in my experience. It’s actually *never* been this good, for me,” he admitted.

“Never?”

“Not that I have a ton of experience, but, well, no. Uh . . .” He looked down at where Ash’s hands were still resting on his chest, and he shrugged, unable to meet Ash’s gaze. He wasn’t really sure how much to say, either. He cleared his throat. “I’ve kissed just a few other guys, and honestly, uh, nothing has even come close. The most it’s ever been before is like . . .

vaguely pleasurable, maybe? This, though . . . this is . . .” He trailed off again.

Ash’s hands slid down lower, to Cass’s stomach, which had the unfortunate effect of putting some space between them. At the same time, however, the touch ignited another fire inside him, and Cass closed his eyes as he let himself really *feel* it—a warmth and tingling that radiated outward, sending his heart racing and another bolt of arousal straight to his groin.

He didn’t have the words to describe how different this was, not even close. So he didn’t really try. Instead, he shifted them, turning around so Ash’s back was to the counter. Then he lifted both hands, framed Ash’s face, and brought their mouths together again in another kiss that started out slow and quickly deepened.

“This,” he said between kisses, “is *incredible*.” He paused and pulled back, resting his forehead against Ash’s and closing his eyes again. “It’s more than anything I’ve ever had. More than anything I’ve ever *expected* to have. And . . .” He brushed his thumb over Ash’s cheek. “And it’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Ash exhaled a shuddering breath. “I’m feeling all of that too,” he said quietly. “It’s just so much.”

“I know.”

Ash smiled under Cass’s palm. “And I just want you to keep kissing me.”

Cass swallowed hard. “I could go for that.”

“Yeah?”

“Totally.”

Cass lifted his eyes to meet Ash’s, and another amazing rush of warmth and want and contentment made his heart stumble and stutter and race. It *was* everything he’d wanted. This, what they had—it was incredible.

Ash’s palms flattened against Cass’s chest. “So do it then. Kiss me.”

Cass was more than happy to oblige.

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*Cass (Sunday, November 27, 2022 – 5:04 p.m.):* Text me when you land

*Cass (5:05 p.m.):* <3

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# Chapter Thirty-Seven

## Ash

"SO, WHAT THE HELL, man? Your flight from Los Angeles just happened to have a stop in *Redding*?"

Grant nudged Ash with his elbow as they stepped up onto the sidewalk outside the parking garage at SeaTac. Ash shoved him back with his free hand and regripped the handle on the car seat.

"Shaina told you?"

"She might have mentioned it."

Ash groaned as he followed Grant along the walkway and into the parking garage. "I should have expected that, I guess."

"Probably." Grant laughed and then reached forward and hit the up button for the elevator. The doors immediately opened, and Ash stepped inside, lugging a fast-asleep Bri along with her backpack and his duffle bag. Grant rolled the suitcase in and pressed one of the buttons. "Hey, I'm happy for you, man, really. Although I can't imagine doing a long-distance thing. Mei and I haven't been dating all that long, but I can't see it working out if we didn't get to, you know, spend time together." Grant shrugged as the elevator started up on its way to the fourth floor.

"Yeah, I don't really know how it's going to go," Ash admitted. "We didn't get a chance to talk about that, specifically."

"Too busy doing *other* things, I imagine," Grant teased with another laugh.

Ash rolled his eyes and shoved Grant again. "Jackass."

"Just calling it like I see it."

“What does that even mean?” Ash narrowed his eyes, but Grant shrugged a nonresponse as the elevator stopped and the doors dinged open.

They stepped out together and started over toward Grant’s car, which was parked in the second row, next to a massive white SUV. As they reached the car, Grant slowed and stopped, fishing in his pocket for his keys.

“You like this dude, right? Cass?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I do. A lot, actually.”

Grant clapped him on the shoulder lightly. “Then I’m sure you two will figure out how to make it work. And like I said, I’m happy for you.”

A light breeze blew through the garage, the early winter chill biting at Ash’s cheeks. He glanced down at Bri, who was sleeping quietly in her car seat. Redness lingered on her cheeks and forehead from her hour-long crying session on the airplane when she realized she did *not* have Ollie the Octopus. Ash clenched his jaw, trying not to shake as he remembered how inconsolable she’d been and how everyone around them on the airplane had nearly cheered with relief when she’d finally fallen asleep just before the plane had landed. It had been as awful and stressful for him as he was sure it had been for Bri and for everyone else around them on the small plane, having to listen to her screaming.

He needed to text Cass.

Ahead of him, Grant unlocked the car and then opened the rear passenger door so Ash could load up Bri and her car seat. A few minutes later, they were on the road, heading east toward I-5. Grant had started talking about Mei and her application process for med school, which sounded daunting and reminded Ash of yet another thing he needed to be thinking about and planning for and doing—finishing his own grad school application, which was due in just about two weeks. He was also much too far behind in every other thing he needed to do, including studying for finals, especially considering how he’d actually, honestly, *legitimately* bombed the last test he’d taken in one of his classes and was now at risk of not even managing a passing grade if he didn’t do really well on the final.

“She’s a strong candidate, I think,” Grant continued, pulling Ash out of the mini spiral he’d entered, “but then, like, the acceptance rate to UW Med School is only like four-point-something percent, so . . .” With a shrug, Grant trailed off.

Ash smirked. “So if she doesn’t get accepted and has to go somewhere else, you’ll have to do a ‘long-distance thing,’ then?”

“Oh, shit, that’s right. Ah, man—”

From the back seat, Bri suddenly wailed, shrill and loud. Ash flinched, and his stomach dropped.

“Oh crap, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake her,” Grant mumbled, though he was barely audible over the painful crying from behind them.

“No, it’s not your fault. She—”

Bri wailed again. This time, it sounded like she was trying to say something, but Ash couldn’t decipher whatever it was.

“She’s had a long weekend. She’s tired,” Ash explained, though that wasn’t all of it, of course. He did his best to twist around in the car so he could reach her with one hand. Her fingers immediately wrapped around his, and she cried more, tugging on him.

“Un-ca Ash, Awwie? Me Awwie? Me Awwie?”

His heart hurt at the sadness in her voice. “Sweet girl, I’m so sorry. I think we left Ollie with Cass. I—”

Another wail filled the car, and Ash grimaced.

“Sorry,” he said to Grant, who just replied with a quick, “nah, man, it’s okay.” Ash pulled out his phone with his free hand as Bri continued bawling from the back seat. “Bri, sweetie, I’m gonna text Cass right now so—”

*Cass (5:24 p.m.):* Uh-oh . . .

A picture of Ollie the Octopus on the floor in the back seat of Cass’s car loaded directly under the first message, and another text followed it.

*Cass (5:25 p.m.):* I hope this doesn’t ruin your night :( I’ll stick it in the mail Priority Express first thing tomorrow. Should get there Tuesday

Ash almost laughed. Of course Cass would be that amazing and thoughtful without Ash even having to ask. But Bri cried again, reminding Ash that Tuesday was an entire full two sleeps away. He inhaled a deep breath and tried to keep the frown out of his voice.

“Bri, sweetie, look!” he said as upbeat as he could. “Cass has Ollie. He’s going to take really good care of him and send him to us in the mail.” Ash clicked on the picture Cass had sent to enlarge it, then reached into the back seat to show Bri the phone screen. Her crying quieted to occasional sniffles.

“Awwie? Cass Awwie?”

“Yes, Cass has Ollie,” Ash repeated, and he started to face forward again, but Bri grabbed the phone, holding him there.

“Me Awwie!”

“You want to keep the picture of Ollie?”

“Da,” Bri said, sniffling again.

“Okay, but can I text Cass back first? Let me have my phone for one minute, okay?”

Reluctantly, Bri let go of the phone. From the driver’s seat, Grant snickered. Ash rolled his eyes.

“Awwie.”

“I know, sweetie. Cass is going to keep him safe, okay?”

“Da.”

Ash tabbed back to the message chain.

*Ash (7:19 p.m.):* Thank you thank you thank you

*Ash (7:20 p.m.):* I can’t believe we forgot him. The flight was torture. Bri screamed for an hour straight

*Cass (7:20 p.m.):* :(

*Ash (7:21 p.m.):* This is going to sound ridiculous, but can you send another picture of him for Bri?

*Cass (7:21 p.m.):* Yes, give me a few min

*Ash (7:21 p.m.):* K, thanks

“Okay, Bri, here you go,” Ash said, scrolling back up and clicking on the picture of the octopus. He handed the phone to Bri, who mumbled something he couldn’t understand and then sniffled again.

Grant exited the freeway about then, easily navigating the dark streets toward Ash’s apartment, and only a few minutes later, he pulled up into a visitor parking spot outside Ash’s building. It took some convincing for Ash to get his phone back, but Bri relented after a promise that he’d let her have it again later, and together, the three of them headed up to Ash’s apartment, luggage in tow. Grant stayed only long enough to make sure Ash had everything and was okay. Then he left, and it was just Ash and Bri.

Alone.

Again.

And for an undetermined amount of time.

Bri sat herself down on the carpet in the living room, clearly pouting but also clearly trying not to show that she was pouting. Ash collapsed onto the couch, promising himself he'd do laundry and unpack later, and he shifted over onto his back and pulled his phone out of his pocket again. He had multiple text messages, all from Cass.

The first one was a set of several pictures of Ollie sitting in different places in Cass's house—first on the couch, then at the kitchen table, and finally on Cass's desk. Then, Cass had sent a short video where he filmed Ollie on his desk and talked to Bri about how he would be sure to take really, *really* good care of the stuffie for her. Ash had the volume turned down low, but Bri still heard Cass's voice, and she jumped up from her spot on the floor and hurried over.

"Cass? Cass Awwie?"

Ash smiled weakly and nodded. "Yeah, look, sweet girl. Cass sent you a video." He played it for her, and she crawled up and sat on top of him while watching it. Then she convinced him to play it again and again. And he showed her the pictures Cass had sent and reminded her how Cass was really good at taking care of people, and so he'd take really good care of Ollie too. Bri cried a little, which was sort of adorable and also sad, and then she curled up on top of Ash and closed her eyes. Ash kissed her head and then read the rest of Cass's texts.

*Cass (7:35 p.m.):* Sorry for the delay there, I was helping my dad with something

*Cass (7:35 p.m.):* Are you okay? And Bri? I'm so sorry, I didn't see him until after I got home and went back out to the car later

*Ash (7:43 p.m.):* The video was amazing of you, thank you

*Ash (7:44 p.m.):* I'm okay, just tired. It's always so hard when there's no way to calm her down. She realized we were missing Ollie right when the flight took off, and she just started screaming. I couldn't help her at all. No one was happy that whole flight until she fell asleep

*Cass (7:44 p.m.):* That sounds awful. I wish I could teleport him to you, but I'm afraid it'll take a day to get him there. I can do a video call with Bri if she needs to see him

*Ash (7:45 p.m.):* LOL

*Ash (7:45 p.m.):* I mean, that's quite generous of you, but she'll live

*Cass (7:46 p.m.):* Yes, but will you? ;)

*Ash (7:46 p.m.):* Debatable

*Cass (7:47 p.m.):* *hugs*

A hug was exactly what he needed. But he knew he couldn't have one. At least, not one from Cass for a long time. How long? Weeks? Months?

The realization—or actually, the reminder—stung. Especially since he now knew what he'd be missing. He closed his eyes and imagined it—being surrounded by comfort, warmth, and softness. And even just imagining it brought him a measure of relief.

He breathed in and out deeply and then did it again.

"Un-ca Ash?" Bri slid off his chest, and when her feet landed on the floor, she pouted. "Un-ca Ash, stah-beh?"

Of course she would want something they didn't have. He needed to go shopping tomorrow. Among the billion other things he had to do. Why was he just sitting here?

He forced another slow breath, opened his eyes, and turned to smile at her. "We don't have strawberries, *but*"—he grinned, trying to distract her from the "bad" news—"I bet we do have apples!"

"Appes?" Her bright-blue eyes looked dull with what had to be resignation and exhaustion as she stared up at him.

He nodded, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Yep. Apples and . . . oh, I can make spaghetti, too! Are you hungry?"

She frowned, and a single tear ran down her cheek. "Awwie."

It hurt again, and for a moment, Ash hated himself. He was always so careful when it came to making sure she had everything she wanted and

needed all the time, and whether it was good for her or not, that darn stuffie had become the most important thing to her. The fact that he hadn't noticed it was gone until it was much, much too late felt like he'd failed her in the worst way.

He didn't want his brain to go there, but it did—heaping guilt and shame and blame on him until he was suffocating, his chest on fire. If he hadn't been so distracted when Cass had dropped them off at the airport, if he hadn't been trying to steal *one more kiss*—the last he'd have for an undetermined amount of time—then maybe, *maybe* he would have noticed the missing stuffie. Maybe Bri wouldn't have been a terror on the flight. Maybe she'd be smiling right now, gleeful to have her second-favorite dinner. Maybe she'd be happy.

His phone buzzed in his hand, but he ignored it for a moment, sat up, and pulled Bri into his lap.

"I'm so sorry, baby girl," he said, hugging her tightly to him. She hugged him back, her chubby little arms wrapping up around his neck, and though she didn't say anything, he could imagine she was telling him it wasn't his fault.

It was. He knew it was. But he definitely appreciated the hug from her, nonetheless.

"Can I make you spaghetti?"

She nodded into him, and he kissed her cheek and stood, lifting her with him. His phone got slipped into his pocket, and he made his way into the kitchen to start cooking and hopefully rid himself of the massive feeling of guilt sitting on his shoulders.



"HEY."

"Hey, you okay?"

Cass's three simple words made the sting of the last several hours—a seemingly endless circle of frustration and guilt—fade to a throbbing pulse. Ash sighed and leaned against the kitchen counter, his whole body weak with exhaustion.

"I dunno. Maybe." He closed his eyes. "Better now that she's finally asleep. I thought it was never going to happen."

"Yikes, yeah. What did it take, three hours?"

“About that long, yeah.” Ash didn’t want to count the twenty minutes he’d had to spend cleaning spaghetti off the floor and the half hour she’d fought with him over taking a bath. Nor did he want to count the extra time it had taken to wrangle her into her pajamas or brush her teeth and hair. In truth, the whole evening had been one struggle-fest, and he wished he could just go to sleep. He sighed, settled the phone between his shoulder and ear, and turned on the water in the sink. “Sorry to call so late,” he said quietly. “I guess I needed company to get myself to do the dishes. I can’t fall behind this week. Too much going on.”

“I understand, and honestly, I’m glad you called.” Cass paused, and Ash could almost hear a yearning in his voice when he added, “I really wanted to talk to you.”

Ash stopped with the pot under the faucet, letting the water rinse off the sauce. “You miss me already?” he asked, half teasing. He knew the answer before Cass even said anything.

“I missed you the moment you left.”

Ash’s chest tightened. “This is going to be harder than we thought it would, huh?”

“Maybe.” Cass laughed lightly. “I mean, I didn’t really think it through when I asked you out. I just wanted a chance to get to know you. I still want that. And I think we can make it work. It’ll just take some getting used to, being apart.”

With a nod that he knew Cass couldn’t see, Ash dumped the water out of the pot and started scrubbing it. “Yeah.” A small smile worked its way onto Ash’s lips. He stuck the pot into the dishwasher and said, “I miss you, too. If that wasn’t clear.”

“Just not quite as much as you miss Ollie the Octopus right now?”

Ash snorted a laugh. “Oh my god, that’s awful and also completely accurate.”

He heard Cass’s muffled laugh on the other end of the line. “Ousted by an octopus. It hurts, man.”

He laughed again, and after the day he’d had, it felt good, even if it was a bit silly. He continued loading the last few dishes into the dishwasher as they chatted lightly about other things—their classes and assignments for the upcoming week, the weather, a book Cass wanted to read. When Ash finally slumped down onto the couch several minutes later, the kitchen clean and one chore checked off his to-do list, it was easily after midnight, which he knew

didn’t bode well for being functional early in the morning, when Bri would inevitably wake up at six.

Yet he didn’t want to hang up.

“So, yeah,” Cass said, still talking about some book Ash could barely remember the name of, “I had to place a hold on it, which is wild. I don’t think I’ve ever had to do that for a book at our library before. Even a popular book like this one.”

“Mmm.” Ash closed his eyes and shifted onto his back on the couch. He had nothing more to contribute to the conversation, but he just wanted to keep hearing Cass’s voice. He wasn’t ready for the *good night* he knew was coming. “Tell me about something else,” he said. “Anything.”

Cass hesitated, which made sense given the time and Ash’s odd request. He cleared his throat. “Anything?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” There was a pause, and Ash opened his eyes as Cass started talking quietly. “This weekend was the best two days I’ve had in probably forever.”

“Oh?” Heat spread to Ash’s cheeks.

“Yeah,” Cass said softly. “See, I got to spend time with this wonderful man and his amazing niece. We’ve become friends over the last year—really, really good friends—and he agreed to visit me and to let me take him out. We spent nearly two full days together, and it was wonderful. Everything I wanted it to be and more.”

“Everything, huh?”

“Yeah.”

Ash bit his lower lip and turned over onto his side. “When will you see him next?” he asked, his voice catching.

“Ah, see, that’s the thing—we were having such a good time over the weekend that I didn’t get to talk to him about that. So I need to ask him, you know, if he wants to see me again sometime.”

Ash half smiled. “You couldn’t tell if he had a good time too?”

“I’m pretty sure he did.” Cass was quiet for a few seconds, and then he said, “I really, really hope he did.”

“He did,” Ash reassured him. “He had the best time. The whole weekend, I—*he* thought it was perfect.”

“So you think he’ll want to see me again?”

His heart stuttered. “I know he will. In fact, I bet he . . . had a moment earlier where all he wanted was a hug from you.”

“Ash . . .” There was something that sounded almost like pain in Cass’s voice.

Ash inhaled deeply. “I don’t know how long it’ll be,” he admitted. “But I’ll be counting down the days.”

He heard Cass let out a sharp breath. “I’ve been thinking about how to make Christmas work or any time over winter break, really, but I talked to my dad earlier and he said he only gets Christmas Day off this year, not even New Year’s, and I just don’t know how to make it happen. I have to be here for my mom.”

“I understand, yeah, totally. And, uh, flying is expensive.”

“And driving takes so long.”

“Yeah.”

A silence stretched out between them, and when Cass spoke again a moment later, his voice was low.

“We agree we *will* figure it out, though, yeah?”

This time, Ash wished *he* could hug *Cass*. He closed his eyes and wrapped one arm around himself. “Yeah. Yeah, we will,” he said.

He swore he felt Cass smile through the phone.

“Okay. Good.”

Ash smiled, too, and he hugged himself tighter. “I should probably go.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“Call me tomorrow?”

“I will.”

“And please—”

“Ollie will be in the mail as soon as the post office opens.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll take more pictures before I send him, in case Bri needs proof of life.”

“God, she probably will,” Ash mumbled with a huff.

Cass laughed lightly and then said, “Good night, Ash.”

And even though he *still* didn’t want to hang up, he knew it was time. “Good night.”

The call disconnected, and a chill spread through the apartment—a reminder that he was alone. He swallowed hard and was about to try to drag himself to bed when his phone buzzed.

*Cass (12:22 a.m.):* Consider this your good night hug <3

A picture loaded—a close-up selfie of Cass. He was in his room, in bed, his head resting on his pillow and one arm bent up behind him. His eyes were as soft and kind as ever, and his warm smile banished every hint of the lonely chill Ash had felt when the call ended.

It was exactly what he'd needed.

He smiled and took a long, slow breath. Then he ran a hand through his hair, lifted up his phone, and took his own selfie.

*Ash (12:24 a.m.):* Hugging you back <3

He sent the photo immediately after the text and had to wait only a few seconds for Cass's response.

*Cass (12:25 a.m.):* Ah, that's the best hug

*Cass (12:25 a.m.):* Good night, Ash

*Ash (12:25 a.m.):* Good night, Cass

With one more long breath, Ash slipped his phone into his pocket, pushed himself to his feet, and shut out all the lights before heading to bed.

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*Cass (Monday, November 28, 2022 – 9:03 a.m.):* Ollie is on his way to Seattle

*Ash (9:58 a.m.):* omg thank you thank you thank you

*Ash (9:59 a.m.):* You have no idea how much I appreciate it

*Ash (9:59 a.m.):* This morning was awful, she is addicted to that stuffie. I feel bad for the people at daycare



*Ash (Monday, November 28, 2022 – 11:02 p.m.):* She's *still* awake, though at least she agreed to stop screaming

*Cass (11:02 p.m.):* I'm impressed you were able to reason with her

*Ash (11:04 p.m.):* "reason" might be a little strong

*Ash (11:04 p.m.):* I think she's just too tired to keep making noise



*Ash (Tuesday, November 29, 2022 – 3:46 p.m.):* Ollie has arrived. All is right in the world



*Cass (7:57 p.m.):* You do realize that's the most precious thing I think I've ever seen?



*Cass (Sunday, December 11, 2022 – 10:57 p.m.):* One hour left. You make it?

*Ash (11:32 p.m.):* application finished and submitted

*Cass (11:32 p.m.):* Woohoo! Congrats

*Cass (11:33 p.m.):* I'm so proud of you <3

*Ash (11:34 p.m.):* I wish I could call you right now but I need to study. I can't fail this test

*Cass (11:34 p.m.):* *hug*

*Cass (11:34 p.m.):* I know <3

*Cass (11:35 p.m.):* 8 am tomorrow?

*Ash (11:35 p.m.):* yeah and then my other finals are wed at 11 and thurs at 8

*Cass (11:35 p.m.):* Call me tomorrow after you're done?

*Ash (11:36 p.m.):* yeah



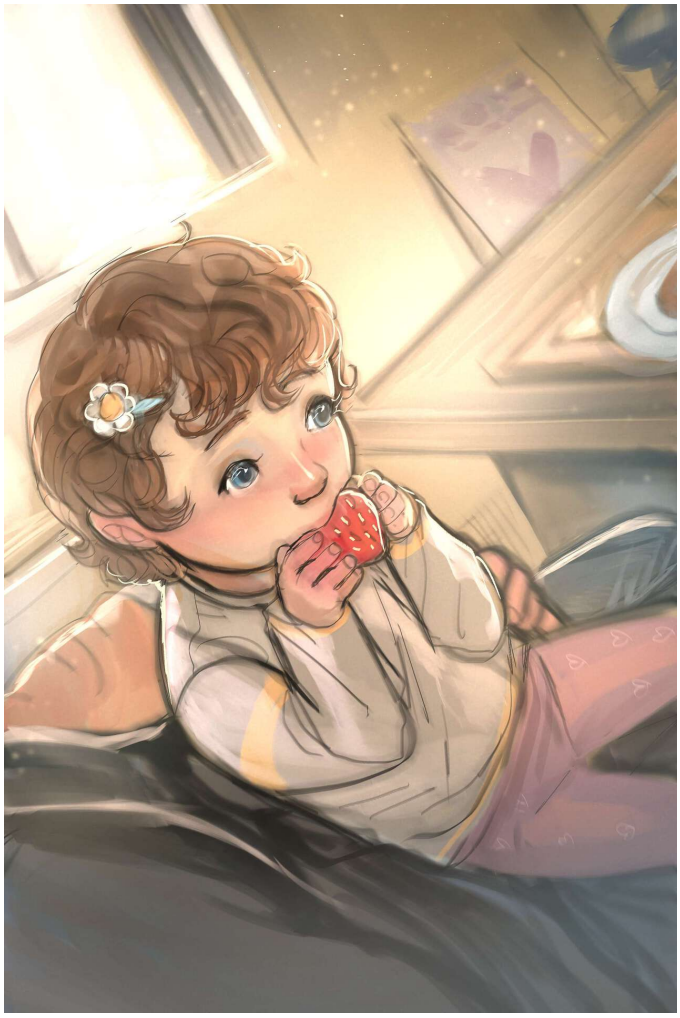
*Ash (Monday, December 12, 2022 – 10:34 a.m.):* just finished. can I call? I could really use someone to talk to :(

*Cass (10:34 a.m.):* Yes, of course



*Cass (Thursday, December 15, 2022 – 1:45 p.m.):* Finals all done and submitted. Whew. You?

*Ash (1:48 p.m.):* All done here, and Bri insisted we celebrate with strawberries



*Cass (1:48 p.m.):* lol the best way to celebrate

*Ash (1:49 p.m.):* I dunno, I can think of at least a few others that might be interesting to explore ;)



*Ash (Tuesday, December 20, 2022 – 11:15 a.m.):* omg I passed

*Cass (11:23 a.m.):* !!!!

*Ash (11:23 a.m.):* 72.1% final grade C

*Ash (11:23 a.m.):* so barely, but I'll take it

*Cass (11:23 a.m.):* Cs get degrees ;)

*Ash (11:24 a.m.):* Yeah I've been trying to tell myself that



*Cass (Friday, December 23, 2022 – 12:31 a.m.):* Good night <3

*Ash (12:32 a.m.):* Hang on, one sec



*Ash (12:34 a.m.):* Good night ;)

*Cass (12:35 a.m.):* Ohhhh wait wait wait wait

*Cass (12:35 a.m.):* god Ash

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*Dad (Friday, December 23, 2022 – 5:33 a.m.):* OT at 8:15 a.m. with Dr. Van Wicklen, no PT because Dr. Granger had to reschedule to next week

*Dad (5:35 a.m.):* Let me know how it goes

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# Chapter Thirty-Eight

## Cass

CASS GROANED AS HE rolled over in bed to silence his six o'clock alarm. How much sleep had he gotten? Four hours, *maybe*? Not enough for what was on the agenda today.

Yet he didn't regret staying up late last night.

Not at all.

He lingered with his hand on his phone, willing himself to ignore the urge to open his text messages and read back through his scroll with Ash, starting with *the first* of the selfies Ash had sent.

The one with the Santa hat.

Then that had been followed by one *without* the Santa hat.

And then another one *without* the Santa hat, taken at a slightly different angle to give Cass an even better view . . .

Cass's throat felt tight, and a rush of heat to his groin reminded him just how much he'd been affected by the selfies. And by the positively flirty text Ash had sent *after* the selfies. *You'd really like it if I shifted the camera lower, wouldn't you?* (Yes, yes, he *would* indeed have really liked that.) He hadn't gotten worked up to the point where he'd needed to take care of things himself, but god, he'd wanted to. And he *still* wanted to now.

He collapsed onto his back again, bringing the phone with him. He had a few minutes before he *really* needed to be up, didn't he? His mom would still be sleeping for another half hour or more. Breakfast could be quick today. Pancakes and eggs. Five minutes to make, tops.

He lifted the phone but then hesitated as the hint of guilt he felt at prioritizing his own needs and desires over making his mom a healthier breakfast ballooned into something heavier.

Homemade oatmeal with yogurt and berries was a much better choice. And what he *should* do for her.

His eyes strayed back to his phone. The time lit up on the screen when he swiped a finger across. 6:04 a.m. Would Ash be up already? Could they—

Growling at his lack of focus and at the direction his thoughts had gone, Cass forced his eyes off the screen, took a deep breath, and dragged himself out of bed. After a quick shower, he got to work in the kitchen, browning the oats and then simmering them in a mixture of water and milk. While they cooked, he cleaned and cut up a variety of berries and fruits they had in the fridge, then set the table. When the oatmeal was done to just the right consistency about twenty minutes later, he set it aside to cool. Then he headed back down the hallway to wake up his mom.

He knocked lightly on the door before entering, as he always did. “Good morning, ma,” he greeted, pushing the door open slowly.

From her bed, his mother smiled at him. “Good morning, Caspian, my sunshine.” Her eyes were tired, as though she’d only woken up a few minutes ago, but her voice sounded strong.

Cass made his way across the room as she tried to push herself up, and she seemed to surprise herself as well as him when she managed to get herself almost to a seated position. He leaned over and set his hand on her back to help her the rest of the way and steady her. Then he gave her a soft kiss on the forehead.

“I made breakfast. Oatmeal just how you like it.”

“That’s so sweet of you, dear,” she said. “It’s been a while since we’ve had oatmeal.”

“Not too long,” Cass corrected gently. “I made oatmeal last week, too.”

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry. My memory isn’t so great in the mornings.”

He moved her wheelchair up to the edge of the bed and then carefully wrapped an arm around her thin body to help her into it. After settling her into her wheelchair, Cass knelt down in front of her with a small smile.

“Do you know what you want to wear today?” he asked. “Maybe that cream blouse?”

“No, no, that one’s itchy. How about . . . the purple one?”

He nodded and squeezed her hand lightly. Then he stood and pushed the wheelchair across to the bathroom. He helped her onto the toilet and then

went back into the bedroom to give her privacy and gather the clothes she wanted to wear. It only took him a few seconds to find her purple blouse and pick out a pair of pants he knew was comfortable for her, and then he sat on the edge of the bed and waited until she called him back into the bathroom.

It took time, as every morning did. He helped her dress, waiting patiently as she tried to button up the blouse herself, and then they headed back into the bathroom. Cass brushed her hair and helped her put on the little bit of makeup she still liked to wear—something he'd gotten strangely proficient at in the last year and a half. It was well after seven by the time they finally made it out to the kitchen and settled in to eat.

His mom loved the oatmeal and was sure to tell him that several times. She also asked about Ash and what his plans were for Christmas, and Cass hoped she didn't hear the disappointment in his voice when he explained that Ash had family friends coming up from Los Angeles to visit.

"They're supposed to fly in this afternoon, actually," he said. He forced a smile. "I'm really glad he won't be alone on Christmas." It was the truth; he was happy Ash wouldn't be alone. Only, his heart still ached at the fact that he wasn't going to be the one there with Ash.

"That's good, although I'm surprised you didn't want to go up there yourself," his mom said, a teasing lilt in her voice.

He frowned and dropped his eyes to the now-empty bowl sitting in front of him, unsure of how much to say. "I did want to go," he admitted quietly, "but I couldn't, you know?"

He sort of hoped his mom would let the subject drop, because he didn't want to get into detail. He and Ash had talked about it a little—about how it was expensive to travel and how it was difficult for both of them to be away from home given their obligations and responsibilities. They hadn't really come up with a solid long-term plan, but they'd talked enough to agree that a Christmas or winter-break visit probably wasn't in the cards.

Cass hadn't gotten up the courage to talk to his parents yet, either about taking the time away when he could or about money. Each trip could easily cost two or three hundred dollars, and he hated the idea of having to ask his parents for the money every time. Not that they'd ever denied him when he had asked, like when he needed new clothes or books for school or other necessities. But this wasn't strictly a necessity, and he was twenty-four years old; he should be able to pay for things himself.

He knew the expectation was unreasonable—the need for him to stay home and help take care of his mom made getting a job nearly impossible,

especially now that he also had school to consider. And both of his parents had been nothing but supportive of that.

Yet broaching the subject—asking them for time and money—gave Cass a stomachache.

Before his mom could respond to his less-than-forthcoming answer, Cass cleared his throat and stood. “I’m going to get these dishes done, and then we should get going, yeah? Don’t want to be late.”

“Caspian,” his mother said, her voice soft and filled with understanding.

He wasn’t ready to talk about it, though. Not yet. And so he turned to her and knelt down next to her and made himself smile, pushing aside all the uncertainties and all his lingering guilt and unease. He took her hand gently.

“Are you finished, ma? Did you want more?” He pushed himself back to his feet and reached out for her bowl, but she stopped him, her good hand settling on top of his. He shook his head. “Ma . . .”

She spoke anyway.

“If you wanted to go, why didn’t you?” Her hand tightened around his, and she tilted her head. “I hope it wasn’t because of me.”

Dammit. He swallowed hard and closed his eyes. He couldn’t lie to her, but he couldn’t really tell her the truth, either.

“It’s just kinda complicated,” he said finally, and he gave her another uneasy smile, which he knew she could see right through. “It’s okay, though. He’s not going to be alone, and he and I talked about it, and we know we’ll figure things out.” That was mostly true, at least. He took a short breath and then said, “Let me do these dishes, and then we can go, okay?”

His mom smiled and nodded, though he saw the sadness in her eyes, and all of his guilt came pouring back, knowing he’d put that sadness there. He leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“I love you, ma.”

“I love you, too, Caspian.”

Ignoring all of his conflicting emotions and the part of his brain screaming at him that he needed to be more honest with her, Cass straightened up, gathered the dishes from the table, and headed over to the sink to load the dishwasher so they could get going.



THE DAY TICKED BY at a snail’s pace, every moment stretched out to the fullest.

His mom’s morning occupational therapy appointment went as well as could be expected, and afterward, he took her out to finish the last bit of shopping they needed to do for the weekend. Like they had last year, they were heading to Stockton on Christmas Day at his mom’s insistence. While that meant Cass was off the hook for cooking Christmas dinner, he still had to help with gift wrapping and shopping for his aunts and uncles and all the rest of their extended family.

The weather turned, too, flipping from sunny and about sixty-five to cloudy and cold, with the threat of rain or even sleet later on in the evening. And with the change in weather, his mom’s symptoms started acting up. She became tired, complained of pain in her hands, and started slurring her words. Cass tried not to worry, but he ended up calling his dad anyway, who reassured him and said he’d be home from work as soon as he could.

When they’d finished wrapping gifts, Cass made his mom a quick dinner—happy to see she still had an appetite. Then he helped her shower and get ready for bed.

By eight, his dad still wasn’t home, but his mom was fast asleep, her breathing regular and deep. Cass stayed with her for a bit longer to make sure she was comfortable, and then he headed back out to switch off the lights in the kitchen.

At the end of the hallway, he paused, his gaze dropping to the gifts sitting under the brightly lit Christmas tree. His hand slipped into his pocket and gripped his phone.

> *Ash (2:33 p.m.):* You got your gift, right? It should have been delivered today

He stared at a small box sitting off to one side, the dark-green paper shimmering in the glowing lights from the tree.

> *Ash (2:33 p.m.):* It’s not much, but I hope you like it <3

He’d been so busy, he hadn’t been able to text back more than just a quick *Got it!* Ash hadn’t texted much during the day, either, Cass assumed because he was spending time with the Wallers, and his heart suddenly ached with the need to talk to him, especially after the aborted conversation with his mom earlier in the day.

He hurried through closing up the house, shutting off all the lights except the porch light for his dad, and then he pulled his phone out again as he closed the door behind him in his bedroom.

A text from his dad popped up on the screen just as Cass sat on the bed.

*Dad (8:07 p.m.):* Leaving work now. Be home shortly. Sorry to be so late

Cass tapped out a quick response, letting his dad know his mom was asleep and how the rest of the evening had gone. His dad replied almost immediately with a thumbs-up emoji, and Cass tabbed back to his chain of messages with Ash.

The last one from a couple of hours ago had just been a smiley face, followed by a photo of Shaina holding Bri outside in a courtyard somewhere with a bunch of Christmas lights and decorations. The caption read *Happy baby!*

Cass stopped halfway between the door and his bed, his heart hammering in his chest, though he wasn't even sure why.

*Cass (8:09 p.m.):* Hey

He sent the single-word text, grimacing as he realized there was no way Ash was going to be available to talk right then. Sure enough, even though he stared at the phone for over two whole minutes, watching the clock in the corner jump from 8:09 to 8:10 and then 8:11 and 8:12, no response came. It made sense. Even if Ash had already put Bri down to bed, he was probably hanging out with Shaina and the Wallers.

They probably didn't get to talk for hours still, if at all.

With a long breath, Cass set his phone on the nightstand, stripped down to his boxers, and crawled into bed and under the covers. It was early, and he knew he wouldn't be sleeping for a while yet, but he was tired enough from the day that he kind of wanted to do nothing.

He reached over and picked up the book he'd been reading, hoping he could get lost in the pages until it was time to sleep. But just as he cracked the book open, his phone buzzed, the screen lighting up with Ash's name. He couldn't answer fast enough.

"Hey."

"Hey," Ash echoed, his voice hushed. There was a quiet click, and then he heard Ash let out a long sigh. "Bri just fell asleep. I hope it's okay that I

called. I'm too tired to text much," he added with a weak laugh.

The softness of Ash's voice steadied something inside of Cass, one of those anxious threads that had been feeling frayed all day long. He set his book back on the nightstand, then closed his eyes and let his head rest on his pillow.

"Long day, huh?" he asked.

There was some rustling, like Ash was settling down on the couch, maybe, and then a low hum. "Mm-hmm, yeah. We were out most of the day. Bri had so much fun, but she didn't nap at all, and I was worried she would have trouble falling asleep too."

"She didn't?"

"No, not at all." Ash laughed. "She was asleep before her head hit the pillow."

Cass smiled. "And why are you still awake, then? Sounds like you could use an early night too."

"Are you saying we should hang up?" There was a clear tease in Ash's voice, which made Cass's heart speed up.

"I'm absolutely *not* saying that."

"Good."

"Good."

Cass heard his dad's truck pull into the driveway, and a moment later, the front door opened and closed, then footsteps came down the hall, disappearing into his parents' room.

"So, did you open the gift I sent yet, or are you one of those super upstanding people who always waits until Christmas Day to open gifts, no matter what?"

Cass chuckled and lifted his free hand up to rest behind his head. "I didn't open it yet. I do usually wait until Christmas. Unless you wanted me to open it sooner."

"Nah, you can wait. I was just curious."

"When I was a kid, my parents always let me pick out one gift to open on Christmas Eve. But then, uh, they never did the whole Santa Claus thing, actually. So all the presents were already out under the tree."

"No Santa?"

Cass opened his eyes, his gaze drifting across the ceiling without focusing on anything in particular. "Nah. My mom hated the idea of lying to me so much that they never even pretended Santa was a thing when I was little. I'm glad that's what they did, because the first time I heard the song 'Santa Claus

is Comin' to Town,' the idea that there was someone watching me and judging me *all the time* really creeped me out."

"It is pretty creepy when you think about it, isn't it?"

"Definitely." Cass laughed and closed his eyes again, which he immediately regretted.

Santa.

Santa hat.

Nothing but Santa hat.

Ash in nothing but Santa hat.

Heat flared through his chest, and he remembered all of his thoughts from that morning, how he'd wanted to stay in bed, scroll back through the pictures Ash had sent, call Ash and see if they could talk. More than talk, actually; he'd wanted to more than talk. Not that he knew how that would work, exactly, over the phone.

Cass groaned.

"What?" Ash asked teasingly, almost like he *knew* all the inappropriate places Cass's mind was going.

And god, how Cass wanted to actually tell him. He should. After all, Ash had to have known exactly what he'd been doing to Cass when he'd sent those selfies last night.

"Can we video call?" he blurted out before he could stop himself. "I want to see you."

It was stupid and irresponsible, and he knew there were much, much more important things he needed to talk to Ash about. At minimum, he should be opening up about how anxious he'd been feeling earlier with regard to needing to talk to his parents about money and time. He should probably also be sharing how worried he was about the two of them not being together on Christmas, and they should also be planning how and when they'd see each other next, even if it was going to be a long ways off.

Besides, what did he expect? They'd switch to a video call and Ash would put on a show for him? Bring the Santa hat out, shift the camera lower, skim his hands down his chest and stomach until—

"You want . . . to see me?" Ash's voice faltered, though he didn't sound particularly confused.

And although his response gave Cass the perfect opportunity to walk it back, he did exactly the opposite. He doubled down.

"Like last night," he said, the words coming out low and deep and almost rough. He heard Ash take in a sharp breath, and more guilt crept in. He shook

his head. “Never mind. That was a dumb idea, I—”

“We can,” Ash interrupted.

And god, he sounded *eager*.

The thought made Cass’s heart stutter and sent another rush of want through him. He shifted his free hand down to his stomach, fighting the urge to let it slip lower. “Are you sure?”

Ash huffed a soft laugh, and Cass could almost picture him, a shy smile on his lips as he ducked his chin and ran a nervous hand through his hair. It didn’t help calm Cass’s desire. At all.

“I’m sure,” Ash said. “Just, um, give me a minute.”

It was a long, agonizing minute that gave Cass’s imagination plenty of time to make several turns it really shouldn’t. By the time Ash returned and the notification to switch to a video call popped up on his phone screen, Cass’s heart was nearly racing with anticipation. He hit the button, only belatedly realizing that meant Ash would be able to see him, too, and he stifled a groan as he turned the phone upward toward the ceiling for a second while he pushed himself up to half sit, propping his pillows up against the headboard.

“Hey now, this is supposed to go both ways,” Ash teased.

Cass’s stomach swooped, and he let out a quiet laugh as more heat rushed to his cheeks. “Yeah, I know. I just wasn’t thinking. Uh . . .”

He turned the phone back to himself and immediately sucked in a breath as Ash’s gorgeous smile showed up on the screen. Ash was reclined on his couch in the same position he’d been in the night before—sans the Santa hat—though he wore a plain white T-shirt. Cass blinked and took in a long, slow breath.

“Hey.”

Ash’s smile brightened even more. “Hey.”

A few seconds of an awkward silence filled the space between them, until Ash laughed lightly and ran a hand up through his hair. Cass followed the action with his eyes, holding his breath as he watched the sleeve of Ash’s T-shirt ride up to show off Ash’s lean, strong upper arm. When he tore his gaze away, Ash’s smile had turned into what had to be a playful smirk.

Was he *enjoying* this teasing?

Cass’s heart skipped several beats, and he slid his hand an inch or so lower on his stomach until his fingers just skimmed the waistband of his boxers. He cleared his throat. “Last night, you weren’t wearing a shirt,” he said carefully.

“You’re right, I wasn’t.” Ash’s smirk deepened, and he seemed to settle more into the couch cushions. “You’d prefer if I took this one off?”

Without waiting for an answer, Ash angled the phone’s camera downward, and Cass swallowed hard as he watched Ash’s free hand slip under the hem of his shirt, lifting the shirt to expose the smooth, pale skin of his stomach. Cass groaned, and he heard Ash chuckle.

“Guess that’s a yes,” Ash said.

Cass’s throat was too dry to respond. So instead, he continued watching as Ash’s fingers inched up higher, the camera pulling back to give him a better view.

And god, what a view it was.

Well-defined abs and a thin trail of dark hair disappeared at the lower edge of the camera’s view, and higher up, Ash’s shirt lifted more, exposing a growing expanse of skin and lean muscle. Ash paused long enough to adjust his position and then let his hand slip back down, out from under his shirt. With an audible sigh that sent Cass’s heart racing even more, Ash flattened his palm and ran his hand down until his fingers barely teased the waistband of his sweatpants.

Cass nearly whined when Ash started back up again, higher this time until the T-shirt lifted enough to give Cass a perfect view of Ash’s chest. He stared, mesmerized by the darker skin around Ash’s nipples, the way the buds looked stiff and taut.

“God,” he rasped.

Ash grinned, and the camera shifted for a second as Ash pulled his T-shirt off over his head in a smooth motion. He settled back on the couch and held the phone out again, his hand moving lower to rest back on his stomach. “Is that better?”

“Huh?”

“The shirt off, like last night. Is that better?” Ash repeated, still grinning.

With a groan, Cass nodded. “Oh, yeah, yes, very much. Very, very much.”

He closed his eyes, giving himself a second to breathe. His body screamed at him, probably louder and more insistently than it ever had before, and he was afraid he was finally losing the battle he’d been waging with himself since yesterday. He let his hand slip down another inch to the hem of his boxers, his swollen shaft throbbing for attention.

A light laugh came through the phone speaker, and Cass forced his eyes back open. Ash had shifted the camera to show mostly his face, his smile playful and lit up in a way Cass hadn’t seen from him.

“I’m enjoying this, if you can’t tell,” Ash said, and he pursed his lips together almost nervously and dipped his chin. “I’m not really sure why, but I am.” He lifted his eyes and met Cass’s gaze through the camera. “Do you want me to keep going?”

*God, yes.* That was Cass’s first immediate thought. He managed a nod but then coughed to clear his throat. “Yes,” he said, “as long as you understand exactly what you’re doing to me.”

Ash’s eyes seemed to darken, and he pulled the phone away, widening the camera view again. Cass could see his hand moving, drifting back and forth across his stomach slowly and deliberately. Ash angled the camera lower, and Cass held his breath as he watched Ash’s fingers graze along that narrow strip of hair and then run over the top edge of his sweatpants and down out of Cass’s view.

“What am I doing to you?” Ash asked, his voice now low and deep and with that teasing lilt to it.

With a groan, Cass pressed his palm into his stomach harder, still fighting against himself. “I think you know,” he hedged. His eyes dropped back to the lower half of the screen, and the most pathetic-sounding whimper escaped his lips. “Are you touching yourself?”

There was a light laugh. “Maybe. Do you want to see?”

“Please,” Cass begged.

The view shifted in a slow reveal that had Cass holding his breath again, his chest tight with anticipation. Ash’s hand moved at an unhurried pace as he stroked himself over the top of his sweatpants, his fingers loosely closed around his erection. Then his hand slipped under the clothing, out of Cass’s view, and Ash moaned softly.

“Jesus.” Cass inhaled a ragged breath, his fingertips finally inching under his boxers. His eyes stayed glued to the phone screen as he watched the outline of Ash’s hand stroking up and down, slowly at first and then faster and with more intent. Ash’s breathing became labored, quiet pants punctuated by other sounds—a whimper, a grunt, another needy moan.

“Ahh, Cass . . .”

Hearing his name on Ash’s lips sent a sharp pulse of want through him, and Cass groaned in response.

“Keep going, please,” he murmured, his fingers skimming down along the underside of his hard shaft. It stiffened more under his touch, and he gripped himself at the base and began a slow stroke back up to the tip. A rough breath

escaped him, and at the same time, Ash moaned his name again, the sound shaking something loose inside him. “God, Ash, I-I need—”

Grunting, Cass pushed the comforter off himself and then shoved his boxers down out of the way, freeing his arousal. He moaned and stroked himself again, slowly one more time and then another before letting himself speed up to match Ash’s pace.

“Cass . . . I’m so close,” Ash breathed, muffling another raspy moan.

Cass screwed his eyes shut for half a second, then opened them again, immediately finding the phone screen and watching as Ash continued to stroke himself under his sweatpants. His chest tightened as heat and pleasure coiled low in his groin. He was close, too. And he wanted it. And he wanted . . . no, he *needed* . . .

“Ash . . . God, Ash, let me see you. Your face. Please, I want to watch you come,” he said, the words strained.

He slowed his hand, trying to delay his own climax. But when Ash angled the camera up and Cass saw his flushed cheeks, tightly closed eyes, and rapid breathing, his expression pure pleasure, he knew he wouldn’t be able to hold back much longer. Ash sucked in a breath and then tilted his head back with a long, deep moan, his body stilling as he came. It was beautiful and hot and more than arousing, and it sent Cass right over the edge with him. His hand pumped one last time as his rigid shaft pulsed with his release, warm liquid spilling out over his fist. He quickly turned his head to muffle a moan into his pillow.

“Mmm.” Ash sounded completely sated—the lazy, quiet, content hum slow and deep. “Mmm . . . wow.”

Cass was breathing too hard to really respond, but he managed to agree with a mumbled “mm-hmm.” He blinked his eyes back open halfway, barely able to see the phone screen through the haze of pleasure. From what he could see, though, Ash looked about the same as he felt, and so he closed his eyes again, released his softening shaft, and gave himself a moment for his breathing to return to normal.

It took him that full moment to realize just how much of a mess he’d made on his stomach and that he hadn’t exactly been quiet and that, god, they’d just had . . . phone sex? Was that what they’d done?

He grimaced and pulled the camera away, setting it face down on his nightstand so he could open the top drawer. Did he even have any tissues or anything? Probably not. He didn’t really do *this* very often, and usually not in bed. Sometimes in the shower, but—

“Cass?”

Ash’s voice came through the phone’s speaker, sounding almost sleepy now.

“Yeah, just—just a minute.”

“Mmm, ’kay.”

He had absolutely nothing in his nightstand, and so he dragged himself out of bed and to his clothes hamper, where he grabbed a towel and wiped his hand and stomach off as much as he could for now. Then he pulled up his boxers, returned to bed, and picked his phone back up.

“Sorry about that, uh, I—” He cut himself off, all the air leaving his lungs the second he saw Ash. He shook his head, and a small, tired smile grew on his lips. “God, you’re beautiful.”

Ash blinked slowly and seemed to huff a laugh, though it wasn’t quite audible through the phone. “I’m *comfortable* is what I am,” Ash said, his voice thick and relaxed.

“You look beautiful to me,” Cass repeated. He wanted to say more, to tell Ash how much he’d enjoyed all of that, how much he’d loved seeing Ash like that—happy and free and playfully sexy. And he wanted to thank Ash for sharing that with him and sharing that side of himself. But everything still felt so overwhelming, in the best possible way, and he couldn’t find any more words.

It seemed maybe Ash couldn’t, either, because neither of them spoke for another minute or two. Then, finally, Ash shifted onto his side and grinned. “That was pretty amazing. I’ve, um, obviously never done anything like that before, but it was . . .” He trailed off and shook his head. “I hope it wasn’t weird or anything?”

“Weird?” Cass narrowed his eyes, confused.

“That I, uh . . . *enjoyed* having you watch me?” For the first time on their entire phone call, Ash seemed unsure of himself, and Cass immediately shook his head.

“Oh, no, no, not weird at all. I loved it. A lot. It was perfect. You were amazing, and I—” He laughed nervously. “I hope we get to do it again sometime. And then, uh, in person, too?”

Ash’s smile turned bright, and a soft glow seemed to surround him, making Cass’s heart flutter. “Yeah, for sure,” he said. “I look forward to it.”

Cass closed his eyes with a quiet hum, basking in the warmth of Ash’s words and the lingering pleasure of their mutual orgasms. He had a sudden

urge to gather Ash up in his arms and kiss him, but he knew that would have to wait.

How long, he wasn't sure. But he didn't want that uncertainty to ruin the moment, either, and so he breathed deeply and opened his eyes again. Ash was watching him with that same soft contentedness, and it tugged at his heart.

"Soon," he said, without really thinking it through. "I'll come up to see you soon."

"I would really like that. A lot."

Cass held Ash's gaze through the phone screen, his heart tumbling as he lost himself in the deep blue of Ash's eyes. Oh, how he wished the future could come faster. He wished *soon* could be now and Ash could be in his arms, curled up against his chest. He wanted that more than anything.

He just needed to figure out how to make it happen.

"I should probably go clean up," Ash said quietly, dipping his chin. "Call me back in fifteen?"

"Me too, yeah," Cass agreed. He still held Ash's gaze, watching as his cheeks turned pink again. It was beyond adorable. "Fifteen minutes?"

Ash nodded.

"Perfect. Okay," Cass said.

They both lingered there for another few seconds, neither of them really wanting to hang up. Finally, Ash tore his eyes away and laughed lightly.

"Fifteen minutes," he said.

"Fifteen minutes," Cass repeated. With a nod, he sighed and then pressed the button to end the call. The screen went black.

He dropped his phone onto the bed next to him, blew out a long breath, and then forced himself out of bed to go shower and change his clothes.

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*Cass (Saturday, December 24, 2022 – 12:33 a.m.):* Two hours earlier than last night at least?

*Cass (12:34 a.m.):* Good night, talk to you in the morning <3

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# Chapter Thirty-Nine

## Ash

ASH WOKE UP TO the sound of heavy rain and the distant rumble of thunder. He didn't bother opening his eyes; he just lay there and listened to the raindrops hitting his bedroom window.

He actually loved the rain.

It was a Seattle stereotype that was one hundred percent true—it rained (or was at least cloudy and overcast) a lot. But he never, ever minded. In fact, he loved mornings like this, waking up to the sound of rain coming from all sides. Even through the morning chill, the rain seemed to wrap around him like a warm blanket, comforting him.

He smiled to himself as another rumble of rare wintertime thunder echoed outside.

*"Ashhhhh, what is that?"*

*"It's just rain. Go back to sleep."*

*"Rain?"*

*"Yeah, you know, the stuff that's wet and falls from the sky."*

*"Ugh, you're so mean. I know what rain is." Ashlynn smacked his arm and then tugged the comforter over her, curling up next to him.*

*Ash frowned. When had she snuck into his bed? From outside, there was a flash of light, and then a loud clap of thunder shook the house.*

*"I mean* that*! What is* that*?" Ashlynn whispered.*

*He laughed, and she smacked him again. Shaking his head, he turned to face her and wrapped his arms around her in a hug. "It's nothing to be*

*scared of," he said. "Just thunder and lightning. Remember? We had a storm like this on our last birthday."*

*"No. No way. I would remember if that had happened. Especially on our birthday. This is too scary." Her voice was small and clearly terrified.*

*Another burst of light lit up the room, followed a few seconds later by a rumble of thunder. Ash felt his sister trembling. He held her tighter. "Shh, I'm here. You're safe."*

"Un-ca Ash? Da boom?" Bri's shaky voice pulled him out of the memory, and he shifted over onto his side so he could see her through the dim light. She was sitting up in the crib, one hand holding onto a rail. Thunder rumbled again, and she squeaked. "Da boom?"

"Ahh, it's just thunder, sweet girl," he said quietly, and he pushed himself up and padded over to the crib. She stood and reached toward him, and he obliged, lifting her into his arms. She immediately curled up against him.

"Da boom?"

He nodded. "Thunder. From the clouds in the sky. That's all. You're safe." Somehow, he managed not to stumble on the words, even as the memory of that late night in his room with his sister more than fifteen years ago echoed in his mind.

Bri hugged him tightly, as though she was still scared but trying to believe him that she was indeed safe. "Bed?" she asked.

"It's morning already. You're still tired?" He shifted her onto his hip, and when she nodded, he started moving back toward his bed. They got settled, Bri cuddled up right next to him, and he pulled the comforter over them, kissed her forehead, and whispered, "I love you."

"Wuv you, Un-ca Ash."

She was asleep again within minutes, but Ash lay there, his eyes closed, listening to the rain. His brain was fully awake, now racing in a huge circle that had no end.

*"Miss you, love you, bye!"*

A tear slipped down his cheek at the memory of her voice, as clearly as though she were right next to him. He missed her. So, so much.

Everything the whole last year had been—all the fleeting, muted highs and intense, suffocating lows; all the pretending to be happy, pretending to move forward, pretending to be strong—it all seemed like a mess. A hole he'd never dig himself out of.

He kept going, because he had to. For Bri.

He'd only just started to feel *anything* other than that deep, lonely grief, and only in the last few months. He didn't know if it could be called hope yet. Or joy. Or something good. And it came and went so unpredictably that sometimes he thought it was still just him pretending, almost tricking his own mind into believing it. But, no, he could feel it. He could feel himself slowly—very, *very* slowly—being pulled up out of the darkness, out of that awful place where everything was dull and gray and so brutally honest, where every moment reminded him of how he was alone, how life didn't matter, how it could end at *any second*.

Sometimes it was fleeting moments with Bri—her joy and bubbly happiness and brilliant smile uplifting him enough to avoid the stabbing pain and guilt that loved to remind him exactly why she was even with him.

Other times, it was with Cass. It was different then, moments that stretched out and felt . . . not deeper, exactly, but more freeing.

Like last night.

He carefully slipped his arm out from under his niece and climbed out of bed, grabbing his phone from the nightstand on the way. The screen lit up with the time, and he almost groaned as he saw it wasn't even yet 6:00 a.m. But his mind was buzzing, and he couldn't stay in bed any longer.

After throwing on a pair of sweats and a hoodie that he pulled from the top drawer of his dresser, Ash snuck out of the bedroom, closing the door most of the way behind him, and then made his way to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. As the coffee brewed, he unlocked his phone, opened up his text message app, and scrolled back through the last dozen or so messages from Cass.

Each and every one of them made his heart soar.

*I'm still floating from earlier*

*You're just beautiful. Your smile. Your eyes. *happy sigh**

*I can't stop thinking about you*

*Soon*

*I promise*

He felt the intention behind each word, like all Cass ever wanted to do was to show him his worth and remind him that he wasn't alone. Ash closed his eyes, breathing deeply as he let himself replay their video call last night. His own eagerness had surprised him, as had the urge to be playful and teasing, to give Cass a show. It had been arousing as hell, too, and any nervousness he'd had had gone right out the window when he'd heard the eagerness in Cass's voice and seen it in his eyes.

Cass had wanted him.

And he'd wanted Cass.

It hadn't been until they'd hung up that he'd realized just exactly how bold he'd been and exactly how much he wanted to do it again, but in person. And along with that had come a huge lump of uncertainty that he'd only managed to barely keep from sending him into a spiral because they'd talked more. Not on a video call, just on the phone and then through text. And not even about anything important. They'd just talked, like they did every night, continuing to build whatever this was between them that was so amazing. Cass had talked a little more about Christmas traditions at his house, told Ash about his extended family they'd be visiting in Stockton, asked if Ash had gotten the gifts he'd sent. And Ash had opened up more, too, keeping things light, but still sharing memories about his own family and Christmas traditions.

Being able to talk about them openly and without breaking down was huge progress, he knew, even if it felt like every bit of progress he was making was fragile and terribly incremental. But Cass being there to listen somehow gave him a strength he didn't know he possessed.

He hadn't expected this to turn into what it had. He hadn't expected to trust so much, to grow to be so open, to feel so comfortable with someone he'd only known for a little over a year. And yet, he did.

Only with Cass.

He pursed his lips, staring at Cass's name on the phone screen. Then, with a silly half smile and a burst of courage, he ran a hand through his hair to smooth it, lifted his phone with one hand, and let his other hand slide up under his hoodie, about halfway to his chest, teasing a hint of bare skin at his waistband. He snapped a picture and sent it, with the text *You get one present to open on Christmas Eve, right? ;)*

Heat flooded his cheeks, though he didn't expect Cass to even see his text right away, and he quickly blacked out the screen, stuck the phone in the pocket of his hoodie, and turned around to pour himself a cup of coffee.

A half hour later, just as Ash had finished cleaning up the kitchen from the night before, Bri came shuffling out of the bedroom, rubbing her eyes with one hand. Silently, she made her way into the kitchen and over to Ash, and then she reached for him.

"Aw, good morning, sweet girl. Did you sleep well?" He lifted her up, and she closed her eyes and buried her head against his shoulder, mumbling

something he couldn't decipher. "We have a lot of fun planned for today with Auntie Shaina. Are you excited?"

She perked up at that, straightening and nodding. "Da!"

"Alright. First, we have to wrap presents, though. Do you remember where we put the presents we bought for Shaina and Joanna and Henry?"

Bri immediately started to squirm, asking to be put down again, and Ash laughed and lowered her feet to the ground. She took off back to the bedroom, now apparently wide awake.

It was definitely not the most efficient way to wrap presents, letting a toddler be involved. But Bri insisted on helping, as Ash had known she would. It was well after eight by the time the few small gifts they'd bought for the Wallers were wrapped, and then Bri made several trips to pile them under the tiny Christmas tree in the corner of the living room.

She clapped and smiled, her grin bright and eager. It was one of those beautiful moments—a moment where he felt joy and hope and love. He lifted her up into his arms again and kissed her forehead.

"Thank you so much for your help!"

"Da! Tay-koo! Tay-koo!" Her hands found his cheeks, and she leaned in and kissed his nose with a dramatic "Mwah!"

He laughed again and hugged her tight. "Time to get ready to go, okay? Shaina and her parents will be here soon, and we're going to go out for breakfast and then to the aquarium and—"

"Out? Go out?" Bri's face lit up even more, if it was possible.

Ash nodded. "Yep! So let's get dressed, okay?"

"'Kay!" Bri nearly jumped out of his arms and took off toward the bedroom again, her chubby legs going as fast as they could carry her.

Ash grinned and started to follow her when his phone buzzed from his pocket. He pulled it out, and his feet slammed to a stop as Cass's name popped up on the screen. A single text, and it made Ash's throat dry and his stomach swoop.

*Cass (8:49 a.m.):* Yes. One present. Fully unwrapped



HE AND CASS TEXTED sporadically throughout the day, though Ash tried his best not to be distracted and to stay in the moment with Bri and the

Wallers. They had breakfast at Geraldine's, Shaina's favorite diner in Seattle, and then they spent hours following Bri around every single inch of the aquarium. She sat in front of the octopus exhibit for nearly fifteen minutes without moving, just staring at the giant orangish mass of arms and suckers. By the time Bri finally agreed to leave, it was late afternoon, hours past when she would usually nap, and she was plenty grumpy and tired.

Shaina and her parents dropped Ash and Bri off at his apartment, and Bri was so tired that she fell asleep in his arms as he carried her from the living room to the bedroom. He got her settled in her crib, turned out the light, and shut the door most of the way. Then he pulled his phone back out of his pocket as he headed down the hall and to the living room.

*Cass (4:35 p.m.):* Dad got home early from work. He's taking my mom out to dinner

*Cass (4:35 p.m.):* You free to talk?

Ash grinned as he collapsed onto his back on the couch. He tapped the screen to start the call and lifted the phone to his ear. Cass answered after just one ring.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Cass blew out a breath. "I've been wanting to hear your voice all day," he admitted quietly. "My mom was teasing me every time I'd check my phone to see if you texted back."

Ash laughed and then closed his eyes, his heart already racing in his chest. "We were out all day. Just got back a few minutes ago, and Bri's napping."

"Yikes."

"Yeah, it'll be a late night if she sleeps for long right now, but she was exhausted and grumpy."

"Does it help to wake her up? Like only let her sleep for a little while?"

"Oh, no, no, no. Don't ever do that. That's worse," Ash said right away.

Cass laughed. "Got it. Don't wake the sleeping child."

"Never."

There was a short silence, and then Ash heard Cass shift a bit and let out a low grunt that meant nothing, he was sure, but that reminded him of all the sounds he'd heard over the phone the night before. Cass moaning his name,

low and deep and with this roughness to his voice that sent a warm shiver up Ash's spine. His cock stirred, and he sucked in a breath.

They shouldn't right now. That type of messing around was for nighttime, when everyone was asleep and they weren't going to be interrupted. Right?

Outside, the rain continued to fall, and the room darkened further. It was late afternoon, but the sun was already down. Bri was asleep. Cass's parents weren't home. There was no *real* reason not to let Cass start unwrapping his present now . . .

The thought sent another rush of heat through him, and Ash shook his head at himself and huffed a weak laugh.

"Mmm, what's funny?"

Ash smiled. Then he closed his eyes again and, after a second of hesitation, gave himself permission to let go a little. "Mmm. Nothing, really," he said. His hand drifted down his chest to his stomach with just enough pressure that he could feel it. "Just, you know, thinking about how many layers I have on."

The tease must have hit, because he heard Cass exhale a sharp breath.

"Too many, I'm sure," Cass said, almost sounding a little breathless.

"You're probably right."

Before Ash had even finished the sentence, his phone buzzed at him, and when he pulled it away from his ear, he laughed. The screen showed a request to switch to a video call. He tapped the button to accept and flashed Cass a silly grin when Cass's face popped up on the screen.

"Eager, are we?"

"Don't tell me you aren't," Cass countered.

His body reacted immediately to the playfulness in Cass's tone, and he bit his lower lip and held Cass's gaze for several long seconds, letting the twinge of arousal simmer back down. Cass seemed to be studying him, his expression soft but curious and, yes, quite eager.

*He* was eager too. Eager and apparently already excited at the thought of Cass seeing him "fully unwrapped."

When he'd sent Cass those selfies two nights ago, it'd been on some weird whim he couldn't really explain that had felt exciting and scary at the same time. Then, last night, when Cass had asked to see him via video call, that inexplicable whim of his had turned into something much more tangible —a desire, an urge to have Cass watch him undress, to share himself in a way he never had with anyone before.

But he'd still kept his pants on.

He wasn’t planning to this time, if that was what Cass really wanted.

He bit his lip again and looked down at where his hand had already ventured, low on his stomach, over top of three layers of clothing. This actually wasn’t going to be as easy as last night, either. He’d be better off if both of his hands were free.

He sat up slowly, his mind racing, and then he glanced back at Cass and grinned.

“Give me one minute.”

After setting the phone down on the couch, Ash pulled his laptop and a couple of textbooks out from under the coffee table, stacked them, and then carefully positioned his phone just right.

“How’s that?” he asked, settling back on the couch so he was completely in Cass’s view.

“Ahh, perfect,” Cass replied right away.

“*Almost* perfect,” Ash corrected.

“Almost?”

He smirked and nodded, and his heart started thrumming in his chest as he leaned forward, still holding Cass’s gaze, and slipped his jacket off. He watched Cass swallow hard and then nod.

“Better,” Cass said, and he shifted to his back, resting his head on his pillow.

Ash tossed his jacket behind the couch and then leaned into the cushions, closing his eyes. He had no idea what he was doing, except letting whatever felt good lead him, and he quickly found himself lifting off his sweater and then teasing Cass, just like he had last night, with a slow reveal of his stomach and chest, using both of his hands this time.

Cass watched, breathing heavily before Ash even had his shirt halfway off.

“God, you’re perfect,” he heard Cass murmur as his hands slipped up far enough for his palms to run over his hard nipples. Heat shot through him, as much from Cass’s words as anything else, and he moaned and tilted his head back into the couch cushion.

He closed his eyes, though he could still feel Cass watching him, and he touched himself, his fingers tracing a slow, deliberate path across his chest to tease his nipples. Cass hissed a few expletives and then begged Ash to do that again, and so he did, moaning as he pleasured himself. His shirt joined his jacket and sweater on the floor at some point, and when he finally sat up and opened his eyes again, smiling knowingly at Cass through the phone screen,

his erection was hard and throbbing, straining against the confines of his jeans.

Cass shifted again, dropping out of Ash's view for a few seconds. When he settled, his dark eyes found Ash's, and he smiled softly and then shook his head. "I won't pretend I don't want to see all of you," he said, his voice sounding perfectly needy and wanting. "But, uh, this whole 'unwrapping my Christmas Eve present' thing? You don't have to if you don't want to. I'm sure you know that."

"I do know," he said quickly. Then he paused and let his hands slip down to the button of his jeans. Cass groaned, his eyes flicking downward to follow Ash's hands. Ash smirked. "And I want to do this."

His cock throbbed again as an intense rush of arousal coursed through him, the ache almost too much. He dropped his chin to his chest and slowly undid the button, then slid the zipper down, groaning at the relief. He looked back up to watch Cass in the phone screen.

Cass's dark eyes stared at where Ash's hands had stopped, and he swallowed hard before lifting his gaze.

God, he looked needy. Ash absolutely loved it.

He bit his lip and let one hand continue downward, rubbing along his inner thigh. "Do you want to see more?" he teased. He already knew the answer, but he wanted to hear Cass's voice and see the desire spike in Cass's eyes.

He got exactly that.

With a ragged, labored breath, Cass nodded. "Yes," he pleaded. "Yes, I want that. Please."

Grinning playfully, Ash wet his lips with his tongue, and then he stood smoothly and turned around, facing away from the camera. He bent over, arching at the hips, and he glanced back over his shoulder. Cass's eyes were wide, his cheeks red, and he groaned and mumbled another "please" as he shifted on his bed. Ash bit his lip and then slid his hands down under the waistband of his jeans, hooking his thumbs around the top of the fabric. He inched them down slowly, his eyes closed. He deliberately left on the pair of thin, dark-gray cotton boxer briefs he had underneath, feeling them stretch across the curves of his ass as he bent all the way over to push his jeans to the floor.

"Oh, god, Ash . . ."

A soft whimper came from behind him as he stepped out of the pants, still taking his time. He smiled and let his hands glide back up the outsides of his

legs and then his ass before he turned around again, his fingers teasing under the top edge of his briefs.

His arousal demanded attention, aching to be freed, but he wanted to prolong the reveal for both his own pleasure and Cass's. He lowered his eyes to watch as he finally slipped one hand under his briefs, flattening his palm to stroke down his swollen shaft.

"Oh, fuck," he hissed, screwing his eyes shut and throwing his head back. Fire raced through his veins, hot and insistent. He gripped the base of his cock and shuddered as his other hand rubbed slowly over the top of his briefs and down his inner thigh. "Cass?"

Cass groaned. "Yeah?"

"Mmm." Ash didn't say anything else. He just stroked himself again, deliberately letting his briefs work down as he did. His cock stiffened even more at his touch, and he heard Cass suck in a breath and whine something that sounded like Ash's name again. "Full unwrapped, right?" he teased, his other hand gliding along his ass and downward, pulling his briefs even lower.

Cass didn't answer except with another deep, needy whine, which sent Ash even closer to the edge, pleasure and arousal and heat coiling low in his groin. He turned around again slowly, bent over to give Cass another view of his ass as he pushed his briefs down the rest of the way, and then straightened, just barely teasing his fingers between his ass cheeks.

God, he was being so brazen.

"Jesus, Ash." Cass's low, throaty whisper was followed by a rough grunt, like he was as close to the edge as Ash was.

Part of him ached with a want to finish now—it would only take a few good, fast strokes. Another part of him longed to bend back over, maybe hike one leg up on the couch, hear Cass's reaction when he ran his fingers down to his hole.

*Maybe next time.*

He whimpered at the thought and flattened his palm back along his ass cheek again.

From behind him, Cass groaned.

"Can I see you now? Please." The words were strained, like Cass was barely holding onto his control.

Ash's stomach swooped, and he slowly twisted back around, his hand stroking up from the base of his cock to the tip. He closed his eyes and moaned, Cass's name escaping his lips on a soft breath.

“Perfect. Ash, god, you’re just . . .” Cass trailed off, and Ash slid his hand down and then back up his shaft slowly, deliberately, teasingly. His thumb brushed over the head, and he shuddered and moaned again, louder this time, as a jolt shot down his spine, heat building in his groin. Through the phone, he heard Cass panting, his heavy breathing faster and more uneven.

Whatever control Cass might have had was nearly gone. And *he’d* done that. *He’d* brought Cass to that point.

It felt empowering.

He lowered himself back onto the couch, his legs falling open as he continued to stroke himself. Each pump of his fist brought him closer and closer to losing control himself, heat and pleasure and a delicious, full pressure screaming for release. He opened his eyes partway, and he saw Cass watching him, groaning, his cheeks flushed and his eyes dark and intense.

*“Perfect.”*

“Fuck,” Ash gasped. He screwed his eyes shut and threw his head back against the couch cushion as he came hard, the pressure releasing in a burst that made his hips jerk. He reached up with his free arm to cover his eyes, breathing heavily, and he groaned and stroked himself one last time, milking the last throb of his orgasm.

He heard Cass’s rapid breathing, too, and when he lifted his arm enough to see the phone screen on the coffee table, the display was dark, as though Cass had maybe put the phone down. Ash smiled, closed his eyes, and lay his head back again, letting his racing heart calm and his breathing slow.

He was about to sit up when he heard rustling and then Cass’s voice, quiet and thick, but full of some deep, raw emotion Ash couldn’t immediately identify.

“God, Ash . . . I wish I could hold you right now,” Cass said, and he let out a short breath and added, “You’re incredible. Beautiful. Perfect. That was . . . that was amazing.”

Ash opened his eyes again. This time, Cass was there on the phone screen, his chest still rising and falling rapidly and his eyes sated and happy and relaxed. He imagined Cass’s hands on him right now, caressing up his chest, and then Cass’s lips covering his in a gentle, affirming kiss.

He gave Cass a weak smile and dipped his head, heat rushing to his cheeks. “I’m glad you liked it,” he said quietly. “I did too.”

He heard a soft agreement, but somehow, Cass seemed to know he needed another minute. He sat up slowly, trying not to dwell on the twinge of

embarrassment at the fact that he was *completely naked*, his legs still open, cum on his stomach and chest.

*". . . incredible. Beautiful. Perfect . . . amazing."*

Ash met Cass's eyes through the camera, and he stayed there as long as he could, letting all of Cass's words wash over him. It was another one of those moments that gave him a feeling of hope, helped pull him out of the darkness. He smiled and then blinked as a tear slipped down his cheek. Shaking his head, he laughed and reached up with one hand to wipe it away.

"Beautiful and perfect," Cass repeated in a low murmur, which only made Ash shake his head again.

Still, he felt the pure adoration in Cass's words, and it did something inside of him, stitching together the edges of the dark hole he kept tumbling down. He blinked back another tear and then cleared his throat.

"I should, um, get cleaned up. Give me a few minutes?"

Cass nodded softly. "Yeah, me too."

Ash pursed his lips, holding Cass's gaze again as more warmth built up in his chest. Then he smiled, pushed himself to his feet, and gathered up his clothes before heading to the bathroom to change.

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*Ash (Sunday, December 25, 2022 – 8:02 a.m.):* It’s impossible. I don’t know :(

*Ash (8:05 a.m.):* Every time I see Bri smile, it’s like that. There’s this feeling of joy, and I can’t deny it, because seeing her like that all happy and carefree is so beautiful. But I see my sister too. Every time Bri smiles, I see Ashlynn. *She* was happy and carefree and beautiful. And now she’s gone and never coming back, and I’ll never get to see her again or hear her voice or feel her hug me. And I have to live with that. I have to live with that all the time, knowing nothing will ever make it go away, and somehow I have to keep going

*Ash (8:09 a.m.):* Sorry

*Ash (8:09 a.m.):* Merry Christmas? =P

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# Chapter Forty

## Cass

THE FIRE CASS HAD started in the fireplace finally banished the early morning chill by the time he and his parents settled in the living room to exchange gifts. There wasn't much under the tree this year; Cass had struggled to make every dollar stretch to its fullest, though he was ultimately happy with the gifts he'd picked out for his parents.

They did as they always did and took turns opening the small items in their stockings. In addition to the usual pair of socks, a toothbrush, a couple of candy bars, and a tube of Chapstick, Cass's stocking also had a deck of cards and a set of several bookmarks. His dad's stocking had a new pair of reading glasses as well as his obligatory annual "joke" gift: a huge sixty-four-ounce bottle of Heinz ketchup, which barely fit stuffed in with the rest of the gifts. Cass's mom's stocking was a bit different this year, since she'd specifically asked only for essentials.

After they finished with their stockings, Cass passed out the rest of the gifts, and they took turns opening those. His mother loved the gift he'd bought her—a beautiful, soft olive-green scarf and matching gloves—and his father also appreciated the new work boots Cass had picked out for him. Cass hadn't asked for much—a few books and a new pair of tennis shoes—and that was what he got.

After everything had been opened, Cass took a minute to clean up the wrapping paper trash. Then he prepared three cups of hot chocolate and brought the drinks out to the living room, along with three slices of the quiche he'd made. He served both of his parents, setting up a small TV tray for his

mom to make it easier for her to eat, and then he settled on the carpet on the opposite side of the coffee table with his own food and drink.

Just like Thanksgiving dinner, the Christmas morning quiche was another holiday meal tradition he'd taken upon himself to continue since his mom was unable to cook it. Both of his parents seemed quite grateful, and his mom in particular noted several times how good it was. When they finished eating, Cass started to get up so he could load the dishwasher before they had to leave to drive to his uncle's in Stockton. However, his dad stopped him by clearing his throat.

"I have one more gift here," he said, and he leaned forward and pulled a thick red-and-white-striped envelope out of the drawer under the coffee table. With a soft smile, his dad settled back into his seat on the couch and gently handed the card to his mom. "For you, dear."

She shook her head. "What is this?"

His dad shrugged with another smile, and Cass leaned back on his hands and watched as his mom slowly fumbled with the envelope. Inside was a card stuffed with several folded papers. She opened the card and the papers, and her eyes narrowed slightly as she read whatever was on them. Then she closed her eyes and smiled, her head tilted slightly.

"Oh, Robert, this is . . ." She trailed off but let her good hand settle on top of the papers.

"What is it, ma?" Cass asked, curious.

"A trip," she said simply, and she glanced back over at Cass's dad. He shifted closer, slipped his arm up around her shoulders, and then leaned in and kissed her temple.

"A trip?" Cass repeated.

His dad nodded. "To San Francisco in April."

Cass's eyebrows arched, and he sat up a little taller.

"It's been a long time since we've traveled at all," his mom said wistfully. "Oh, are you sure, Robert?"

"I already got the time off, booked the hotel, everything," his dad explained, his voice low and soft. He kissed her again and then added, "I'll tell you all about it on the way to Dan's."

The way his mom's smile lit up was beautiful, and Cass let out a breath and then dropped his gaze. There was a quiet laugh, followed by a pause and then a hushed whisper.

Cass was about to stand and get started working on the dishes so they'd be ready to leave on time, but his dad cleared his throat again.

“That would be a good time for you to go visit your boyfriend in Seattle, wouldn’t it, Caspian?”

Cass’s eyes widened, and he looked up. Both of his parents were watching him, his mom still smiling softly and his dad’s expression almost teasing. He opened his mouth to speak, but the only words that came out were “Uh, huh? What?”

His mom’s smile deepened, and his dad laughed.

“You should go to Seattle while we’re gone in San Francisco,” his mom said.

With a nod, his dad added, “Makes sense, right?”

Cass swallowed hard as his brain finally caught up. For a fleeting second, his heart soared at the possibility. Then, reality crashed back down, and he lowered his eyes and frowned. “I’d love to do that,” he admitted, “but I’m not sure if I can. The money, you know? The flight isn’t cheap, and I don’t really have—”

“Oh, no, no, Caspian,” his mom said gently. She let out a soft breath, like a weak laugh, and Cass glanced back up to see her look at his dad.

“We’ll pay for the flight.”

Cass’s stomach clenched. “But I—”

“We’ll pay for it,” his dad repeated, a little more firmly this time. Cass dropped his eyes again. “You do so much around here to help both of us, and you never really ask for anything in return.”

“We want you to be happy, Caspian,” his mom added, and his dad agreed with a quiet hum.

It was so generous of them, and he both loved and hated it at the same time, excitement and eagerness warring with all the built-up shame and guilt he had over money matters.

April. Four months. He could get to see Ash in four months.

He closed his eyes as his heart stuttered, and even though his internal monologue continued to berate him over not being able to pay for the flight himself and taking away his dad’s hard-earned money just so he’d have a chance to hug his boyfriend in person, Cass nodded, keeping his chin down.

“I would really, really appreciate that,” he said. “A whole lot.”



CASS SAT IN FRONT of his mom, studying her face. “I think that’s good? I love the color, ma. What do you think?” He set down the eyeshadow he’d just applied and held up a mirror for her.

Her crooked smile grew on one side, and she gave a soft nod. “I like it too,” she said.

“Alright, good. Ready then?”

“Yes, I think so. If your father is.”

Cass stood, took a moment to put away his mom’s makeup, and then pushed her wheelchair out of the bedroom and down the hallway. His dad stepped in from outside, pulling his coat tight around him and shaking his head.

“It’s cold. Let me grab you another coat before we leave, dear,” his dad said softly to his mom.

Cass stopped the wheelchair and waited while his dad got his mom’s heavier coat and helped her put it on. Then the three of them headed outside to the car, where Cass helped his mom into the front seat and loaded the wheelchair in the trunk, shuffling around the presents his dad had packed earlier to make room.

A few minutes later, they were on the road and headed south toward Stockton to spend most of the day with family. Cass sat in the back seat, and though he’d cracked open the book he’d brought to read, he found himself staring at the page, his eyes not really seeing the words.

“. . . the four-day weekend’s all ours.” Cass’s dad lifted his mom’s hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her knuckles softly, though he kept his eyes on the road. “I do wish it could be sooner, but work is going to be busy for the next couple months.”

His mom hummed quietly. “April is better anyway,” she said, her voice its usual slow pace. “The weather.”

“True.”

“We’ll see the symphony? It’s been years.”

“I already bought the tickets.”

His mom laughed lightly. “And to see the Giants play?”

“Their schedule didn’t really factor into my planning. I was more concerned about the symphony for you.”

“So, that’s a yes.”

“I managed to snag us seats right along the third-base line,” his dad admitted sheepishly.

Cass smiled to himself and closed his book, listening as his parents continued their conversation in the front seat. They talked so easily, a quiet intimacy and softness between them that spoke of how deep their love was.

He longed for that.

And he longed for that *with Ash*.

The thought made his heart soar and yearn at the same time, and he stared out the window for a few minutes, his eyes unfocused, as he let the feeling settle in him. He didn't know exactly what to call it, but it felt incredible and hopeful and bright.

With a slow breath, he set his book down on the seat next to him and pulled out his phone. Then he opened up his text message chain with Ash. A new message from a few minutes ago popped up on the screen.

*Ash (9:33 a.m.):* Bri officially agrees with you about Santa

A picture loaded of Bri sitting on Shaina's lap on the couch, her face red and tears streaming down her cheeks.

*Cass (9:38 a.m.):* Uh-oh, what happened?

*Ash (9:38 a.m.):* Henry showed up dressed as Santa

*Ash (9:39 a.m.):* She was terrified. Shaina tried to talk her through it. Not happening

*Cass (9:39 a.m.):* xD

*Ash (9:40 a.m.):* Henry felt so bad

*Cass (9:40 a.m.):* I bet. Is she okay now?

Ash didn't respond right away, which was fine. Cass had a longer text to type out anyway. It took several minutes of him typing and restarting and typing and restarting, unable to decide how much to write and exactly what to say. He finally settled on something relatively short and simple, figuring they could discuss details later.

*Cass (9:48 a.m.):* So my dad's Christmas present to my mom is a trip to San Francisco in April. And my parents' Christmas present to me is a trip to see you at that same time

April seemed impossibly far away. At the same time, however, it was *something*—a date to look forward to. *And* his parents were going to be gone for four whole days, which meant Cass could also be gone for four whole days.

Four whole days with Ash. Four whole days of getting to spend time together *in person*.

*Ash (9:51 a.m.):* What? Really??? You're serious?

A grin split Cass's face, and he pursed his lips to rein it in as he replied.

*Cass (9:51 a.m.):* Yes, I'm serious <3

*Cass (9:51 a.m.):* April 21-24

*Ash (9:52 a.m.):* omg wow

*Ash (9:52 a.m.):* I can't tell you how much you just made my day

*Ash (9:53 a.m.):* Shaina just laughed at me and asked me what's going on

*Ash (9:53 a.m.):* god I can't wait

Cass glanced up at his parents. They'd stopped talking, but his dad still held his mom's hand, his thumb rubbing gently back and forth along her skin like it was the most natural thing in the world.

It was soft and tender and beautiful, and his heart longed for it again—to have that, with Ash. He closed his eyes for a few long seconds. Then, with a deep breath, he looked back down at his phone and Ash's new message.

*Ash (9:54 a.m.):* Call me tonight? <3

*Cass (9:54 a.m.):* I will. Might be late

*Ash (9:55 a.m.):* I'll be up

*Cass (9:55 a.m.):* I can't wait

*Cass (9:56 a.m.):* Oh, how is Bri? You never answered

*Ash (9:58 a.m.):* Ah, right, sorry! We're getting ready to go out for breakfast. She's okay, ish. She's being super clingy now and only wants me to hold her. Poor Henry feels awful. Shaina thinks it's hilarious

*Ash (9:58 a.m.):* Might have to skip Santa from here on out, which wouldn't be that bad really. We'll see

*Cass (9:59 a.m.):* I didn't have Santa and I turned out fine ;)

*Ash (9:59 a.m.):* Can confirm

*Cass (10:00 a.m.):* xD

Ash disappeared for a while, and Cass tried to read again. He had a little more luck this time and managed to make it through a few chapters, even as his mind kept distracting him, fluttering in scraps of thoughts here and there completely unrelated to the book. Some were very much inappropriate to be thinking about while in the car with his parents. Others, tangentially related, were jumping him four months forward, to whatever his weekend with Ash would look like.

They were all quite pleasant distractions, even if he kept having to read the same page over and over.

By the time they exited the freeway, Cass had put his book away and was on his phone, planning for April.

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*Cass (Sunday, December 25, 2022 – 8:43 p.m.):* We're just leaving now, and it's about a three-hour drive. Should I still call later?

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# Chapter Forty-One

## Ash

ASH'S APARTMENT WAS QUIET; the Wallers had left hours ago, Bri was asleep in the bedroom, and whatever loud, raucous party a neighbor of his had been hosting down the hallway had finally, finally ended. Ash himself was exhausted. The day had been nonstop—waking up to Bri's excitement about Christmas morning, having to keep her occupied until the Wallers showed up, dealing with the meltdown she'd had over Henry's attempt to play Santa Claus, and then everything else that followed. They'd stayed at his place nearly all day, Shaina and Joanna taking over his kitchen to cook the most amazing Christmas dinner, and they'd watched movies, entertained Bri, eaten, talked.

Being surrounded all day by the closest thing he had to family had been exactly what he'd needed, even if it made the silence now a little difficult to exist in.

As he lay down on the couch and closed his eyes, he fought against the feeling that he was completely alone again and the grief that wanted to overpower him. He forced his thoughts back to earlier and all the little, wonderful, joy-filled moments from the day. Moments where he'd not only felt surrounded by love and been able to talk about his sister and parents with the Wallers but where he'd been able to laugh and smile as he remembered her, even if there was still a deep sadness around it.

"Merry Christmas, Ashlynn," he said out loud, and even though she didn't answer back, he could feel her presence, like she was right there, tugging him

up off the couch to hug him with all the enthusiasm she always had. “Miss you, love you . . .” He shook his head and sniffled, then said, “Bye.”

And he let out a long, slow breath as his body seemed to release some of the tension he’d been holding in his shoulders. A tear slipped down his cheek, but just one, and he almost managed to smile against it.

With another breath, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. The time read 1:29 a.m., though he still had no new notifications. Cass was supposed to text when he got home, which probably should have been about an hour and a half ago. Frowning, Ash typed a short text.

*Ash (1:30 a.m.):* Hey, everything okay?

*Cass (1:30 a.m.):* Yeah, sorry

The quick response didn’t tell him anything, and he sat there for several minutes waiting for the phone to ring or for another text to come through. His gaze drifted, landing on the last of the unwrapped packages under the tree. Bri had opened her present from Cass earlier, and she’d been so excited about the book—some adorable story about an otter named Ed—that she’d made every single person, Henry included, read it to her. Ash had taken video and sent it to Cass. Ash’s gift, however, still sat there, unopened.

He set his phone down on the coffee table and pushed himself up off the couch, then padded over to the tree and picked up the medium-sized package. “It’s not much,” Cass had told him when the package had arrived on Thursday. He’d immediately responded that he could guarantee it was more than he’d ever gotten from a boyfriend before, and they’d both laughed.

His phone buzzed, and he glanced over to see the screen lit up with an incoming phone call, Cass’s name on the display. He brought the box over with him and set it on the coffee table as he sat and lifted the phone to answer.

“Hey, I was getting worried,” he said quietly, settling back into the couch cushions and closing his eyes.

“Hey, yeah, sorry.” Cass sounded winded or something, and Ash frowned.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, really,” Cass reassured. He let out a sigh, and there was a sound like his bed squeaking. “If you’d believe it, we actually hit traffic on the way home. There was an accident involving a big rig, and the whole freeway was backed up for miles. Mom was already sleeping, so it didn’t stress her or anything, but we just got home maybe ten minutes ago.”

“Ah, yikes. She’s okay, then?”

“Yeah. She had a wonderful day. I, uh . . . I’m almost scared to say it, because I don’t want to jinx anything, you know? But she seemed better in a way today.”

“How so?” Ash opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling.

“Hmm, well . . .” Cass’s voice sounded deep and low and sleepy, and Ash pictured him snuggling into his bed, resting his head on his pillow as he pulled the covers up over him. “A bunch of little things, I guess. The way she spoke, how much she ate, how long she spent outside, watching all the kids play on the back lawn. I dunno.”

There was something in Cass’s words that tugged at Ash’s heart, and he smiled and closed his eyes again. “Sounds like a good day.”

“Yeah, it definitely was. Except one thing.”

“Hmm?”

Cass laughed lightly and cleared his throat. “I missed getting to talk to you.”

“We’re talking now,” Ash countered with a grin.

“Yeah, but it’s technically no longer Christmas.”

“It still is in Hawaii.”

“Mmm, Hawaii.” Cass hummed. “Have you been?”

The meandering conversation was like so many others they’d had, and Ash loved it. He lifted his free arm up behind his head and settled more into the couch. “No,” he said, “but it’s on my bucket list. You?”

There was another soft laugh. “I’ve barely traveled beyond the West Coast. I went to New York once on a high school trip, but only because we all ran this huge fundraiser and one of the small businesses here sponsored it. Mr. Parsons from the hotel, actually. Do you remember him?”

“I do, yeah.”

“He’s a good man.” Cass yawned. “Anyway, yeah, no, never been to Hawaii.”

“We should go someday.”

“Should we?”

“Yeah. I could teach you to surf,” Ash said with much more confidence than he actually had.

“You surf?”

“No,” he admitted. “But I could learn and then teach you.”

Cass snorted a laugh. “In Hawaii?”

“Yup.”

“Alright. I’m game,” Cass said, still laughing. “I should figure out how to be comfortable in the water first, though.”

“Probably.”

The conversation continued on for a few more minutes, mostly about this imaginary future trip to Hawaii, until Cass yawned again, which made Ash yawn. He pulled the phone away from his ear to check the time and sucked in a breath. 2:06 a.m.

“Ugh, it’s so late. We’re going to regret this in the morning,” he said, putting the phone back up to his ear.

“Nah. We’ll be exhausted, but that . . . builds character or something. Right?”

Ash rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. “Sure, sure. Except you’re not the one who’s at the mercy of a one-year-old. Bri will be wide awake at six. Or possibly five. Maybe I should call you and make you talk to her then, so I can go back to sleep.”

“Do it,” Cass said. Then he chuckled. “I’d love that. Bri’s so fun to talk to on the phone.”

With a groan, Ash pushed himself up. “You say that now, but if I *did* call you at five in the morning, you might have a different opinion.” His eyes drifted to the coffee table, where the gift from Cass still sat. “Ah, I didn’t open the present you sent yet. I was waiting until we were on the phone together.”

“Oh, that’s right.” There was some rustling and a quiet grunt as though Cass was also sitting up. “I have yours, too.”

“Mmm, you go first then,” Ash said quickly, scooting closer to the edge of the couch.

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“’Cause I said so. Just do it.”

Cass sighed with obvious sarcasm. “Alright, if you insist. Hang on one minute.” There was a click and then silence for a few long seconds before Cass returned. “Okay. Here we go.”

“Wait. Take a guess first,” Ash cut in, though he almost immediately regretted it.

“Take a guess?” Cass repeated.

“Ah, yeah. It was . . . it was something my sister and I used to do when we were old enough to start getting each other gifts. But never mind, you

don’t have to. It was always just something silly. I mean—” He sighed and tried not to get sad as memory after memory played in his mind. He closed his eyes. “It was silly, like a game. Like, uh, we’d come up with the most off-the-wall things.”

“Like me guessing that what’s in this box is an inflatable surfboard for me to use on our trip to Hawaii?”

Ash couldn’t help but laugh, sadness mixing with warmth and joy. He nodded. “Exactly.”

“Well, that’s not actually my guess,” Cass said, a clear tease in his voice, “because the box weighs much too little for that. Hmm . . .” There was a sound like maybe he shook the box and then another thoughtful hum. “I’m going to go with chocolates.”

Ash’s eyebrows arched. “Chocolates?”

“Not just any chocolates. Chocolate-covered grasshoppers. High in protein, you know. Healthy *and* filling.”

Ash burst out laughing and promptly covered his mouth to muffle the sound. “Healthy and filling,” he echoed. “Jesus.”

Cass chuckled. “It wasn’t *that* funny.”

“It’s 2:00 a.m. It *was* that funny!” Ash argued.

“Hah. Okay, fair, fair. So, can I open it now?”

Ash bit his lip. “Yeah. Go ahead and open your chocolate-covered grasshoppers.”

There was a light laugh, which only deepened the pleasant warmth spreading through Ash’s chest, and then he listened to the telltale sound of paper ripping.

“You know, I would have taken you for someone who would unwrap your presents slowly, be careful not to tear the paper or something,” Ash teased.

“Hmm, well . . .” Cass huffed another quiet laugh, and Ash could almost picture his smirk as he said, “I think *you’re* the one who likes to unwrap things slowly.”

Ash groaned—both with the memory of their phone call the night before and at the pure silliness of the response—and they both laughed again. It *was* silly. And he loved it.

“Ohhhh, wow, Ash . . . I can’t believe you remembered. I think I only mentioned this book once.”

“You did, just after Thanksgiving,” he said quietly. “Now you don’t have to keep waiting for the library copy to come available, *and* you can annotate it if you want.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cass said, and then he paused and blew out a breath. “Ah, I love this. Thank you so much. I will *not* stay up even later tonight to get started reading. But I might read most of tomorrow, and so it’s your fault if I’m too busy for much else.”

Ash pursed his lips, still smiling. He’d been worried; the gift really wasn’t much, but they’d agreed not to go overboard anyway since money was tight for both of them, and he’d thought the book would be the perfect gift. He was glad to know he’d been right. His eyes landed on his gift again, and he sat up a little straighter and reached forward.

“My turn now?” Ash said, the words catching in his throat.

“Yes, definitely.” Cass’s answer was immediate, and Ash could hear the smile in his voice as he asked, “What’s your guess?”

“Hmm . . .” Ash balanced the phone between his shoulder and ear and picked up the package. It had weight to it, and he could feel something shifting around inside when he moved it. “It’s gotta be . . .” He paused, trying to think of the most outrageous thing he could. “It’s gotta be a giant potato carved into the shape of an otter.”

“A . . . a what?”

He heard Cass laughing softly, and he repeated, “A giant potato, which accounts for how heavy it is.”

“Carved into the shape of an otter.”

“Of course. Because you know how much Bri would love that.”

“But this is *your* gift,” Cass countered.

“True. So maybe it’s a giant potato carved into the shape of . . . an apple?”

“Because teachers love apples?”

“Sure. Yeah, let’s go with that.” Smiling, Ash started unwrapping the paper, rolling his eyes at himself when he indeed tried to not rip it. “I actually have no idea what it is.”

“I know,” Cass said, amusement in his voice. “And it’s not much, but . . . yeah.”

Ash removed the paper to reveal a plain white box, the sides taped shut. He folded the paper up and placed it on the coffee table, then he peeled away the tape and lifted the top of the box. Inside was a green envelope with his name on it, sitting on top of several sheets of tissue paper, which covered whatever was underneath.

Something suddenly felt very real about the moment, and he stumbled over his words. “I-I’m opening the card now.”

Cass must have heard the waver in his voice, because he chuckled and said, “Did you rip the wrapping paper?”

“I most certainly did not,” Ash retorted, grinning through whatever emotions were happening in his chest.

The card was a simple Christmas card with a beautiful watercolor painting of a huge pine tree and falling snow on the outside. Inside was a short, handwritten message from Cass. Ash’s heart seemed to skip several beats as he read to himself.

*Ash,*

*I hope this Christmas brings you as much joy, love, and happiness as you’ve brought to my life. You’ve made my whole world better, just giving me the chance to get to know you, and I’ve appreciated every single moment.*

*I’m looking forward to whatever the future holds and the many more Christmases we will get to spend together.*

*Merry Christmas!*

*- Cass*

Ash inhaled a long, slow breath and read the note again before setting it down on the wrapping paper on top of the coffee table. He cleared his throat, very aware that Cass was waiting for him to say something. “Th-thank you,” he stuttered, “for the card. It’s, um . . .”

“I meant every word,” Cass said softly, the sincerity in his voice perfectly clear, even over the phone.

With a small nod, Ash said, “I know you do. And . . . and it’s the same for me. You’ve made my life better in ways I can’t even articulate. I-I’m so grateful to have you in my life.” He managed to hold back tears, which seemed like a miracle in that moment, especially considering all the emotions bubbling up inside him.

“Your giant potato is waiting,” Cass said, and Ash snorted a laugh, very glad for the obvious redirect.

“Right, right. Yeah. My otter-apple potato.” He sniffled, though he still wasn’t crying, and he gently unfolded the tissue paper. A huge smile broke out across his face, and he chuckled. “Oh wow, this is ten thousand times better than a potato. Really.”

Under the tissue paper were about half a dozen large Ziploc bags filled with rows of cookies. He lifted out one of the bags, shaking his head.

“Did you make all of these? Are they all chocolate chip? Oh my god, I love this.” He dug around the box, pulling out each bag.

“Yes, and no, there’s also—”

“Ohhhh, snickerdoodles?” Ash cut in as he took out the fourth bag. “This is so many cookies. I love this,” he repeated, in case Cass couldn’t tell. He stopped and put the bag back into the box. “Thank you so much. This had to take forever to bake. I actually didn’t know you baked.”

“I don’t, much,” Cass admitted. “My mom used to, though. And when I went off to college, she would send me these huge care packages with dozens and dozens of cookies, like this. I shared with my whole dorm freshman year and then with my roommates the years after that. It, um . . .” He hesitated, and his voice softened. “I dunno, it always felt really special, like I knew how much she was thinking about me, even when I was hours away. I . . . want you to feel that way, too.”

It was so sweet and so *Cass*, and Ash closed his eyes. “I . . . I do. I do. Thank you.” He groaned but also laughed and flopped back into the couch. “God, I can’t wait for April.”

“Me too,” Cass agreed immediately.

“We’ll have four days, yeah?”

“Yeah. Or, I mean, it’ll depend on when I fly in and out, but it should be three or four full days.”

That sounded like heaven, and Ash sighed contentedly as he curled up on the couch. “I wish you were here right now,” he murmured. “But at least in your absence, I can eat a cookie.”

Cass huffed, and his voice sounded tired when he said, “Pretend I’m there, giving you a good night hug.”

“Mmm, I am.” Ash smiled softly. “And I’m hugging you back.”

He could almost hear Cass smiling in return.

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*Cass (Tuesday, January 3, 2023 – 7:53 a.m.):* First day! How do you feel?

*Ash (7:56 a.m.):* Angry with whoever made this schedule (spoiler: it was me, I picked my own schedule)

*Ash (7:56 a.m.):* Stacking all of my classes on Tues/Thurs seemed like a good idea at the time

*Cass (7:57 a.m.):* But not now that you realize you'll be on campus all day long?

*Ash (7:58 a.m.):* Exactly



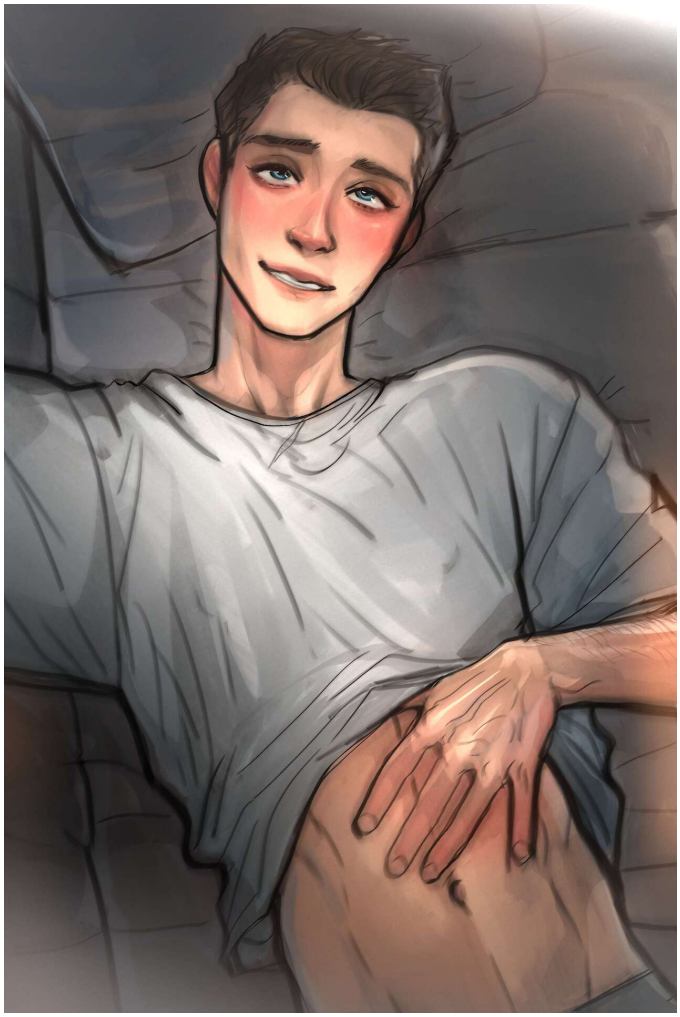
*Ash (Monday, February 13, 2023 – 9:54 p.m.):* Done with my research paper. You still up?

*Cass (9:54 p.m.):* I'm up. Been working on my part of a group project

*Ash (9:55 p.m.):* Can you take a break?

*Cass (9:56 p.m.):* What kind of break are we talking? ;)

*Ash (9:56 p.m.):* What kind of break do you want? ;)



*Cass (9:57 p.m.):* YES



*Cass (Tuesday, February 14, 2023 – 6:33 a.m.):* Happy Valentine's Day <3

*Ash (11:58 a.m.):* <3

*Ash (11:58 a.m.):* Will you be my valentine?

*Cass (2:30 p.m.):* Always



*Ash (Friday, March 3, 2023 – 5:49 p.m.):* OMG OMG OMG I got in!!!

*Ash (5:49 p.m.):* The email just came!!! I wasn't expecting it for another week or so

*Cass (5:50 p.m.):* !!!!!

*Ash (5:50 p.m.):* "Dear Asher Finnley, Congratulations on your offer for admission to the University of Washington Graduate School for Summer 2023 to the Master in Teaching (MIT) - Elementary Teacher Education Program (ELTEP)." Ahhhhhh!

*Cass (5:51 p.m.):* That's amazing, I'm so proud of you <3

*Ash (5:51 p.m.):* Can I call?

*Cass (5:52 p.m.):* Yes!



*Cass (Sunday, April 2, 2023 – 8:45 p.m.):* You feeling better?

*Ash (9:02 p.m.):* Not really :(

*Cass (9:03 p.m.):* Bri's asleep, right? Can you try your medication?

*Ash (9:07 p.m.):* Took it about an hour ago, but it's not helping

*Ash (9:07 p.m.):* I haven't had a migraine in a while. I forgot how awful it is

*Cass (9:08 p.m.):* *hugs* I hate that there's nothing I can do

*Ash (9:08 p.m.):* I know



*Ash (Tuesday, April 18, 2023 – 12:59 p.m.):* Two days!

*Cass (1:00 p.m.):* Two days!

*Ash (6:44 p.m.):* Bri is running circles around the couch singing "two days, two days, da da da da da daaaaa!" Guess she's looking forward to seeing you too ;)

*Cass (7:02 p.m.):* Ugh, that's too cute

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*Joe (Thursday, April 20, 2023 – 7:54 a.m.):* Thanks for joining me on the trail this morning! It's been hard to find a consistent running partner around here, and I know you're not a runner, so I appreciate it ;)

*Joe (7:56 a.m.):* Safe travels later! When you get back, be honest with me about how much it rains xD

*Joe (7:57 a.m.):* My sister finally picked a moving date, and she needs me to make a decision. I'm leaning toward yes

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# Chapter Forty-Two

## *Cass*

“CASS! CASS COME VISIT? Come pway!”

Cass had barely stepped inside the door to Ash’s small apartment when Bri grabbed his hand and tugged him with her out of the entryway. It wasn’t the first thing he’d imagined doing when he’d arrived at Ash’s place after not having seen his boyfriend in person for almost five months, but Bri was adorable and insistent enough that he found himself following along behind her, letting her lead him into the living room. He cast a longing look at Ash, since they hadn’t even gotten to properly greet each other yet, but Ash just grinned back and shrugged.

Bri ignored his plight and continued leading him over to the coffee table. She stopped between the couch and the table and pointed at a neatly lined-up row of toys—all various marine animals.

“See! Pway! Dis whay an otter an dawphin an oct-pus an seaw an . . .”

Cass’s eyebrows went up as Bri kept going down the row, naming every single animal.

“Wow, Bri, you have so many toys. How are we going to play with them?” Cass asked, still holding her hand.

“We pway!” Bri said exuberantly. She let go of Cass’s hand, picked up a manatee toy, which was about twice the size of her hand, and then angled it toward the row of toys. “Rawrrrr!”

Cass flinched as Bri slid the toy across the table, crashing it through the whole line of other sea creatures, then banged the toy down against the

table.

“Oh no! Man-tee rawrrrr!” she repeated, and she looked up at Cass, giggling. “Pick up! Now pick up!” she instructed. She bent over, picked up the dolphin, and handed it to Cass. “Un-ca Ash pick up too!” She grabbed the otter from where it had landed under the coffee table and gave it to Ash, who had moved up behind Cass after the initial crash.

“She wants us to line them back up so the manatee can destroy the whole line again,” Ash explained. He leaned over and placed the otter toy back on the edge of the coffee table, and Bri nodded in agreement and then took Cass’s wrist and guided his hand to place the dolphin next to the otter.

“Oh, I see. Like this?” Cass sat on the couch and then picked up a clownfish toy and set it in the row.

Bri’s smile widened, and she clapped. “Yay! More! More!”

Amused, Cass picked up another toy and then another, setting them in the growing line on the table. Bri clapped enthusiastically with each one. After Cass set the final toy in the line, Bri giggled and stepped in front of him, realigning each toy into a straighter line.

“Dis. Yah, dis,” she mumbled as she worked.

Cass watched her for a few seconds, then looked up at Ash, who still stood next to the couch, an amused smile on his face. Their eyes met, and Cass’s stomach swooped.

*You’re absolutely beautiful*, he wanted to say, because it was true. Yes, he’d seen Ash quite a bit thanks to their frequent video calls over the last several months. But seeing him over the phone was nothing like being with him in person. Everything about him seemed so real and soft, and there was this joy in his expression, a depth to his gorgeous blue eyes, a warmth surrounding him that Cass could feel.

With a sharp breath, Cass pushed himself to his feet, closed the distance between them, and slipped his arms low around Ash’s waist.

“Hey,” he said quietly.

Ash smiled. “Hey.”

Cass’s arms tightened around Ash, and without another word, the two leaned in together, their lips touching in a gentle kiss that seemed to say everything Cass hoped it would. He smiled against Ash’s lips before kissing him again and then once more, his heart suddenly feeling so full. Ash laughed lightly and pulled back, but his eyes sparkled and his smile lit up.

*Absolutely beautiful.*

Cass lifted his free hand and ran the backs of his fingers along Ash's jawline, his heart rate speeding up at the roughness of the faint hint of stubble.

"Mmm." He watched his fingers caress across Ash's skin, and he swallowed and then lifted his eyes again.

Ash's smile softened. "I'm really glad you're here," he said.

Cass's stomach swooped again. "Me too." He quickly dipped back in for another kiss, which deepened briefly. When they parted, they tipped their foreheads together, and Cass closed his eyes. "I—"

"Rawrrrrr!" Bri yelled, and there was another loud crash as she once again destroyed the neat line of toys.

Cass barely held back a laugh. He opened his eyes and straightened up slightly, grinning as he met Ash's gaze. Ash also seemed to be on the verge of laughing, though he was obviously much more used to Bri's shenanigans than Cass was. With a silly eye roll, Ash tipped his head toward Bri and mouthed, "Three . . . two . . . one . . ."

"Oh no!" Bri squealed. "Man-tee rawrrrr!"

Cass snorted a laugh and then dropped his arms from around Ash's waist and turned to Bri. "Rawrrrrrr!" he echoed, picking her up. He swung her around in the air above him, and she giggled and squealed more and kicked her legs.

"Cass rawrrrrr!" she said, her laughter filling the room. He brought her back down and set her gently on the ground, and she was still giggling as she looked up at him and said, "Yay, Cass, again! Up!"

He glanced over at Ash for permission, and when Ash nodded with a shrug, Cass did it again, lifting Bri up with a playful "rawrrrrr!" and then swinging her around in a big circle over his head while she squealed gleefully. After another few rounds, Cass settled on the couch, Ash joining him, and Bri went back to playing her manatee attack game, sometimes switching out for "orca rawrrrrr!" or "shark rawrrrrr!" She gradually became less interested in making Cass and Ash line up the toys, and it wasn't more than fifteen minutes or so later that she worked her way around to the other side of the coffee table, plopped down, and started stacking blocks instead.

When it was clear she was going to keep occupying herself, Cass settled back into the couch cushions, slipped his arm up and around Ash's

shoulders, and turned to his boyfriend with a smile. “She’s adorable, I’m sure you know that.”

Ash laughed. “I think *she* knows it.”

They sort of stayed there like that for a moment, staring at each other. Cass felt his cheeks heating up, but he didn’t want to look away or move away or put any distance between them.

There’d been too much distance between them for too many months already now.

“I missed you,” he admitted, his voice low and soft, and he reached up and touched Ash’s cheek again, then tilted his head and brushed a light kiss on Ash’s lips.

Ash dipped his chin. “I missed you too.” He let out a quiet huff. “It’s strange, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“How we talk all the time, every day, and it seems like we’ve been together for so long. It seems like I’ve known you for so long and that I know you so well, and yet . . .” Ash’s eyes lifted back up to meet Cass’s, and Cass nodded.

“. . . and yet *this*”—Cass’s fingertips gently grazed Ash’s skin again, this time just under his ear—“is still so new, because in all that time, we’ve barely been together?”

“Exactly,” Ash said on a breath. He closed his eyes and leaned into Cass’s touch, his hand coming to settle on Cass’s thigh. Then, with a sigh that sounded perfectly happy and content, he rested his head in the crook of Cass’s shoulder. “To have you here, to be able to do *this*,” Ash said, his hand pressing a little more into Cass’s thigh, “feels both unfamiliar and totally familiar.”

“I’m definitely feeling that too.” Cass smiled and dropped a kiss on the top of Ash’s head. “Guess we have to work at it a bit to get all of this feeling very, very familiar,” he teased.

“Oh, no, what a hardship.”

“Mm-hmm.”

They both laughed, and then they stayed like that, Ash cuddled up in Cass’s arms, talking quietly as Bri played with her toys. It *was* all so new still, all of this intimacy, and even when the conversation turned to something else, Cass found himself hyperfocused on every sensation—the

weight of Ash's hand on his leg, the soft warmth of Ash's breath through his T-shirt, the tickle of Ash's hair against his cheek.

At one point, Ash tilted his head back, gave Cass a crooked smile as his hand inched upward on Cass's thigh, and said, "You didn't hear a word of what I just said, did you?"

Before Cass could answer, Bri chimed in with a loud "Did you?! Did you?!," before knocking over all of her blocks. "Oopsie!" She giggled and started stacking them again.

Ash shook his head and then leaned in and kissed Cass, grinning the entire time. "So, honestly, did you hear what I said?"

"I, ah, might have been slightly distracted."

"By what, exactly?" Ash teased, and Cass closed his eyes, barely able to suppress a groan, as Ash's palm flattened into his leg and slid down toward his knee and inward.

"Mmm," was all Cass could manage.

Ash's lips brushed against Cass's cheek, and he laughed lightly and pulled his hand away. "Sorry."

They kissed again, a brief, gentle kiss that was somehow also playful, and when Ash started talking, Cass did his best to try and listen this time.

"So, what I was saying earlier is that if you're game, we can go hiking tomorrow," Ash proposed. "There's this trail in the Snoqualmie Pass area, out past North Bend, and I've been wanting to take Bri, but the weather's been bad. I went with my family when I was a kid, and it was one of those places Ashlynn absolutely loved. She was always talking about wanting to go back." Ash paused for half a second and took a breath before continuing. "I figure we can make a day out of it, pack lunch for a picnic. It's maybe a seven-mile-ish hike, and if I'm remembering right, it's stunningly beautiful, the lake and the views."

"That sounds like a perfect day," Cass said softly, and he held Ash to him a little tighter as they settled back into their spots, Ash's head once again resting in the crook of Cass's shoulder.

With a little more planning, they had the rest of the weekend roughly outlined. Saturday, Ash's friend Grant and his girlfriend, Mei, were taking Bri to the zoo, which would give Ash and Cass the entire day alone together (no more planning needed, Ash teased). Then on Sunday, Ash suggested maybe they could go to the Pacific Science Center; he'd taken Bri once

before, after he'd gotten a nearly free family membership, and she'd absolutely loved it.

Cass thought all of that also sounded perfect, and he told Ash so, chasing his approval with a lingering kiss on the lips. Ash pulled back first, though he was smiling, and Cass bit his lip, once again mesmerized by the depth and beauty of Ash's eyes. His heart fluttered and flipped, and he found himself immediately wondering if maybe they could get Bri to bed early tonight.

That reminded him of the plans *he'd* had for the evening.

He wanted to pamper Ash. To take care of him. To give Ash a night off from being the one responsible for *everything*.

He wanted to show Ash exactly how much he cared.

Gently, he ran the backs of his fingers along Ash's forearm, stopping right below Ash's elbow. "Can I make dinner for you and Bri tonight?" he asked, letting his fingers trace back down to Ash's hand.

Ash's smile softened. "You want to cook?"

"We have to eat, right?"

"Well, yeah, but I figured you'd be tired from traveling, and I'd cook or order takeout or something like that."

Cass shook his head once, then he lifted Ash's hand and kissed the backs of his knuckles, one at a time. "I would like to cook for you, if that's okay," he said. "And then, I'd like you to rest or relax or do whatever it is you want to do that you don't usually get to, and I'll take care of Bri and her bedtime routine and everything."

Ash dropped his eyes to their hands, and he didn't say anything for a few seconds. When he looked back up at Cass, there was an exhaustion in his eyes that Cass hadn't seen in them before. He leaned in slowly and kissed Ash's forehead.

"Whatever it is you want to do," Cass repeated.

With a quiet laugh, Ash nodded. "Yeah, okay. Honestly . . . it's been a week. If you're sure . . ."

"One hundred percent." Cass kissed Ash's forehead again. "I'll take Bri with me to the grocery store—there's one right down the street, yeah?" When Ash nodded, he continued. "You can relax, take a bubble bath"—Ash rolled his eyes—"or nap or lie here and watch TV. Whatever you want. I'll take care of dinner and bedtime."

"That's a lot, though. You don't have to—"

“I want to,” Cass cut in. He squeezed Ash’s hand, though he could still see uncertainty in Ash’s eyes. He shook his head. “You’ve done so much this last year. Work and school, and taking care of that beautiful little girl over there, by yourself all the time. You deserve a night off. Let me give you that. Let someone take care of *you* for a change.”

“Cass . . .”

“I want to,” he said again.

Ash blinked his eyes closed for a long second but then glanced over to where Bri was still playing, now sitting in the middle of a circle of blocks, all of her marine animal toys piled in the circle with her. His smile returned as he watched her play, and he nodded slightly.

“I’m . . . I’m so tired sometimes,” he admitted.

“I know.” Cass let his thumb drift back and forth along Ash’s skin.

“Everything is so much, and it’s exhausting.” His gaze fell to their hands. “I do my best to keep her happy.”

“She *is* happy. She’s the happiest baby I’ve ever seen.”

Ash rolled his eyes and looked up at Cass with a sarcastic smile. “And just how many babies have you seen?”

Cass didn’t answer; he didn’t have to. Because it didn’t matter. Bri *was* happy. Ash was doing an incredible job with her, especially given the circumstances, and even though Cass didn’t really know what it was like to parent a young child, he knew about being in charge of someone’s care twenty-four seven. He was certain Ash was more exhausted than he’d ever, ever let on, even in his most vulnerable moments.

“Food allergies? None, right?” he said with a smile.

Ash blinked and then laughed and shook his head. “No allergies. I’ll eat anything. Bri isn’t usually super picky, but lately she’s been refusing to eat meat—chicken, beef, pork, everything.”

“Hmmm . . .” Cass quickly ran through his arsenal of memorized recipes and then grinned. “I’ve got it. No problem.” He turned toward Bri. “Bri, sweetie, want to come shopping with me?”

The child’s eyes immediately lit up, and she jumped to her feet, knocking down all the blocks around her. “Yay yay yay! Go out! Cass go out!”

Cass grinned and glanced back at Ash as Bri came bounding over, clapping and repeating “yay yay yay! Go out!” He was watching Bri, and when she reached them, Ash let go of Cass’s hand and lifted Bri into his lap.

She bounced joyfully, clapping again, and then threw her arms up around his neck and hugged him tight. It was precious and a beautiful thing to see, but though Ash smiled as he closed his eyes and hugged her back, the exhaustion he'd let Cass see earlier was still there, not well hidden anymore.

"You be good for Cass, okay, sweet girl?" Ash said, and Bri pulled back.

"Un-ca Ash go out?"

"No, I'm going to stay here and sleep."

"Ohhhh, nap time. Nap time Un-ca Ash," Bri said, nodding gravely.

Ash chuckled and looked down. "Yeah. But Cass is going to take good care of you for a bit, okay?"

"'Kay! Cass go out, me go out, Un-ca Ash nap!"

"Exactly. Can you go get the diaper bag for Cass?" Ash asked, and he gently lifted her off his lap and set her back on the floor. With a big, eager nod, Bri took off toward the bedroom.

Cass pushed himself to his feet and then offered his hand to Ash. "Alright, so, you just relax and don't worry about a thing. Bri and I will handle dinner and everything. Okay?"

He helped Ash up, and Ash then slid his arms around Cass's waist and nodded into Cass's shoulder as they hugged. It felt like another of those deeply intimate moments that had such weight to it. Cass didn't want to let go.

With a quiet hum, he tightened his arms around his boyfriend and turned his head to kiss Ash's cheek. "I've got you," he murmured. "You're okay."

Ash sucked in a breath and nodded into Cass again. "Yeah, yeah. Sorry. Just . . . I'm just tired."

"I know," Cass whispered, rubbing his hand up and down Ash's back lightly. "I know."

Ash took a deep breath and then another, and he seemed to let go of some of the tension he'd been holding as he leaned more heavily into Cass. "God, I'm so glad you're here," he said, his voice wavering.

Cass's heart stuttered, and he held Ash tighter. "Me too. I am too."

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*Shaina (Thursday, April 20, 2023 – 6:34 p.m.):* Sooooooooo . . .

*Shaina (6:34 p.m.):* How’s it going? ;)

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# Chapter Forty-Three

## *Ash*

CASS GAVE ASH ANOTHER of those wonderful, warm, comforting hugs before he took Bri's hand and left the apartment.

Then everything was quiet.

But the quiet wasn't rattling or dark. And for once, it didn't feed the monster of grief deep inside him. Instead, it felt peaceful and relaxing in a way he hadn't known in so, so long.

He did exactly as Cass had suggested—whatever he wanted. He started with a long, hot shower, taking his time. Then he slipped on a pair of plain gray sweatpants, closed the shutters, and collapsed onto the bed. He intended to lie there for just a few minutes before maybe getting up and reading a book or something, since he was sure his brain wouldn't stay quiet enough for him to actually sleep. But he must have been wrong, because the next thing he knew, Bri's eager voice carried in from down the hallway.

"Me take? Me fwower?"

Cass's voice followed, but it was too muffled for him to hear the words. Not more than a few seconds later, Bri's footsteps came right up to the edge of the bed. Ash smiled and opened his eyes as he turned his head to look at her.

"Un-ca Ash," she whispered, obviously struggling to not be too loud. Her eyes were as bright as her smile, and both of her hands were hidden behind her back. "Un-ca Ash up?"

“Yeah, sweet girl, I’m awake. How are you?” He shifted onto his side to face her, and she grinned even wider.

“Cass fwower for Un-ca Ash!” she declared, and she brought both of her hands out from behind her back. “Ta-da!”

Ash pursed his lips in an attempt to not laugh at her expression when she realized her hands were completely empty.

She giggled and said, “Oopsie!” Then she spun around, bent down, and picked something up off the floor. She turned back to him and tried again, still grinning as she held out a single deep-red rose. “Fwower for Un-ca Ash!”

Ash’s heart melted, and he pushed himself up to sit. “For me?” he asked softly.

“Yes!” Bri nodded. “Cass fwower for Un-ca Ash!”

He reached out and took the flower’s stem from Bri, warmth growing in his cheeks. He didn’t quite know what to say, but Bri seemed to have that handled. She took his free hand and tugged lightly.

“Eat? Un-ca Ash hungy? Time eat!”

“Dinner already? How long was I sleeping?” he asked, standing up and lifting Bri with him.

She giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Looooooooong nap!” she said with another laugh.

Ash smiled and kissed her cheek. “Mmm, I guess so, huh? Let me get a shirt and I’ll be out in a minute, okay? Can you tell Cass?”

“Yes!” Bri declared, and she squirmed a bit until Ash set her down, then took off running while calling Cass’s name.

Ash stood there for several seconds, staring at the rose. His heart was doing funny things in his chest, and that sense of quiet, that deep contentment he’d felt earlier when Cass had hugged him, he felt it again, spreading like a gentle warmth.

He’d had so many reservations about starting a relationship. Months back, when Cass had first asked him out on the pier at Portage Bay, he’d genuinely been terrified of saying yes. The risk of loss—*more* loss than he’d already experienced—had been much too great, and it had been very, very hard for him to convince himself otherwise.

He should *still* be terrified, he realized, because he’d fallen. Hard.

The wonderful man who’d gotten him this beautiful rose and cooked him dinner and taken care of his niece so he could rest—that wonderful

man had easily become Ash's best friend. Losing him now, after all of the other losses Ash had suffered . . . that would be more pain than Ash could handle.

Yet, he somehow wasn't scared at all. Not anymore. And he couldn't quite explain why. With Cass around, everything was soft and warm, full of promise and hope. Even when things were hard, Cass made it better.

Maybe . . .

Maybe he was in love.

Ash closed his eyes, focusing on the feel of the rose stem in his fingers for another couple of seconds, and he smiled. Then he headed over to the dresser to throw a T-shirt on.

By the time he made it out to the kitchen, Bri was settled in her high chair next to the small dining table, munching on some strawberries. Cass was on the other side of the kitchen island, portioning out servings of pasta and green beans onto plates for them. He smiled warmly as Ash approached.

"Hey," Cass greeted. "Sleep well?"

Ash didn't answer. Instead, he stepped around the island to join Cass, set the rose down on the counter, and wrapped both arms around Cass's waist before leaning in for a soft kiss.

"Mmm," Cass hummed, his hand coming to rest on Ash's upper arm. "Guess that's a yes?"

"Yes, I did," Ash answered, before dipping back in to capture Cass's lips again. Cass smiled against him, and Ash decided right then and there that feeling him smile as they kissed might be the best thing in the world. He pulled back enough to see Cass's face, his brown eyes soft and kind and so clearly full of the exact same feelings Ash was having.

Oh, yeah. It had to be love.

With a smile of his own, Ash leaned in for one more kiss, then straightened up again and stepped back, letting one hand linger on Cass's lower back. "Can I help with anything?"

"Absolutely not," Cass said, grinning. "You can sit, and I'll bring everything over. What's your drink of choice? Coffee, water? I grabbed a bottle of wine, but I don't think I've ever seen you drink alcohol, actually." Cass arched his eyebrows in question, and Ash shook his head.

"I really don't. At least not much," he admitted. "I had a beer once—Grant insisted that I try it when I turned twenty-one. I hated it."

Cass laughed. “I get that. It took me a while to get used to the taste. My friend Brendan buys this local IPA that’s pretty good, but I’m not much of a fan of typical beer brands, and I only drink wine on special occasions.”

“This is a special occasion?” Ash teased.

“Feels pretty darn special to me,” Cass countered with a silly grin.

Ash held Cass’s gaze for a second, and then he nodded. “Yeah, I think you’re right. I’ll try the wine. Just a little, though.”

“You got it.” Cass rubbed his hand gently along Ash’s upper back. “Have a seat, and I’ll bring everything over.”

Ash did as he was told. Cass took a moment to put the rose in a small vase, which he placed in the center of the table. Then he brought over a plate for each of them. The pasta, he explained, was a mushroom stroganoff recipe he adapted from his mom’s beef stroganoff, which was one of his dad’s favorite meals, and the green beans were also something his mom used to cook all the time. Bri cut in to let Ash know there was also “pie” (which he knew meant it probably *wasn’t* actually pie since Bri called nearly every dessert “pie”), and Cass grinned and reminded Bri that the dessert was a surprise. Bri giggled and put a finger up to her mouth with a quick “shh!”

Dinner was fantastic, and Ash even found himself liking the wine, though he only had a few sips. They talked and laughed, and Bri kept them amused with her running commentary as she ate.

“One bite!” she declared loudly each time she successfully used her fork to eat a noodle or green bean. Then she’d switch to picking up her food with her fingers and say, “More! Yum!”

After dinner, they had the “surprise” dessert, which was an incredible chocolate mousse cake Cass had snagged from the store. Then, Cass did exactly as he’d said he would. He cleaned up the kitchen and took care of the dishes, and he ran through Bri’s entire nighttime routine with her while Ash lounged on the couch, reading a book. It was just about eight thirty when Cass finished tucking Bri in and finally joined Ash out in the living room.

Ash had reached the end of a chapter, and so he closed his book and set it down on the coffee table as Cass slipped into the end seat on the couch with a quiet sigh.

“She’s asleep already,” Cass mused. “She was nodding off during the last few pages of her book. Well, the second time we read through it.”

“Ah, you’re quite skilled then. Twice is the *minimum* number of reads. Usually she insists on at least three.”

Ash swiveled around and scooted over on the couch, then lay his head down in Cass’s lap.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

Cass’s low hum was followed by a gentle touch—his fingers caressing slowly down Ash’s bare forearm and then back. It was warm and divine, and the same deep contentment he’d been letting himself feel all night washed over him again, surrounding him in a comfortable haze. Cass’s fingertips kept caressing his arm, stroking softly back and forth with a tenderness that felt so real and genuine. With a quiet sound of approval, Ash closed his eyes.

“Mmm, you’re going to make me fall asleep again if you keep that up,” he said, and he took another deep breath as Cass chuckled quietly.

“If you’re relaxed enough to fall asleep, please do.”

“Mmm, I don’t want to,” Ash said. “But I’m really, really comfortable.”

“Good, good. I’m glad to hear that.”

This time, Cass’s hand ventured higher up Ash’s arm, past his elbow and up to his shoulder before smoothing back down. The soft touches continued, accompanied by the occasional brush of Cass’s other hand along his forehead and through his hair. Ash hummed with contentment again and then shifted over onto his back, opening his eyes partway.

Cass gazed down at him with a kind smile, his fingers caressing along Ash’s forehead.

“That feels good, too,” Ash said, his voice thick with relaxation. “Can you do it again?”

Cass obliged, grazing his fingertips gently across Ash’s forehead to brush his hair back. “Like this?”

“Mmm, yeah, like that.” Ash closed his eyes and turned his head slightly so his cheek rested on Cass’s stomach, and Cass continued, tracing a slow path down Ash’s cheek and then turning his hand over so the backs of his fingers ran down the side of Ash’s neck. Ash’s skin tingled, a pleasant buzz that spread into his chest. He smiled and let out another sigh of contentment.

“You look happy,” Cass said quietly.

Ash blinked his eyes back open and gazed up at his boyfriend. “I think I am. And it’s been a really long time since I’ve been able to say that,” he admitted. “Tonight helped. It was perfect. I really needed it. Or . . . or maybe . . .” Ash paused and lifted a hand up to cup Cass’s cheek. “Maybe I just needed you.”

Cass’s expression softened, and he seemed about to say something, but nothing came right away. Instead, he brought his hand up to cover Ash’s on his cheek, then turned his head slightly and kissed Ash’s palm. It was such a small gesture. Yet it was tender and caring in a way that made Ash’s stomach swoop.

Ash lowered his hand and then pushed himself up to sit, scooting back until his mouth was only inches from Cass’s. He smiled and leaned in, and Cass met him in a kiss they didn’t have to rein in or hold back or finish early. No one was going to interrupt them, and they had nowhere else to be and nothing else to do.

It was just the two of them, there, together. *Finally.*

Their lips met slowly, the kisses gentle, exploratory. At the same time, Cass’s arms slipped around Ash’s midsection, holding them together, and Ash let his hands drift up Cass’s chest and then around to clasp together at the back of Cass’s neck.

He’d imagined this. He’d been imagining it for nearly five months now—getting to kiss and touch his boyfriend, having Cass hold him. He’d imagined more, too. Every time they’d fooled around together on the phone or on a video call, every time Ash had had the urge to put on a little show for Cass, get naked, jerk himself off while Cass watched—he’d imagined how different it would be to do that in person, to be able to step up to Cass and let Cass touch him, too. To be fulfilled in the need he felt *afterward*, rewarded by Cass’s arms wrapping around him. A real hug. An actual kiss. *Contact.*

Right now, though, felt different. It wasn’t teasing and playful or even hot and intensely arousing. Instead, it had a softness to it, something quiet and purposeful and healing. Each kiss slowly tugged at a deep need inside Ash—a need he hadn’t even known existed until earlier that night.

He moaned as Cass’s hand inched under his T-shirt, smoothing slowly along his lower back.

“Mmm, is this okay?” Cass asked, pulling back and letting his lips trail down along Ash’s jawline and then his throat.

Heat spread through Ash’s chest, and he gasped, “Yes, yes, it’s good.” He tilted his head back to give Cass better access and was rewarded when Cass paused right at the junction of his neck and collarbone, sucking gently on Ash’s sensitive skin. With a groan, Ash added, “Whatever you’re doing, please keep doing it.”

He felt Cass hum against him, and Cass continued, kissing every inch of exposed skin as his hand slowly caressed back and forth above the waistband of Ash’s sweats. His heart thrummed unevenly in his chest, heat growing with every kiss and every touch. The next time he moaned, even he could hear how rough and needy he sounded.

Cass’s lips paused right below Ash’s ear, and his fingers slid up higher, lifting Ash’s shirt. “Mmm, Ash . . .” Another kiss brushed his skin. “Can I take this off?”

He nodded and mumbled another yes, and with all the gentleness and care Ash had come to expect, Cass slowly shifted them, slipping Ash’s shirt off and then guiding him to lie flat on his back on the couch. He closed his eyes with a soft sigh and let his hands smooth down Cass’s shoulders and back as Cass moved over top of him, kissing a deliberate path up his neck and to his mouth.

“You’re so beautiful,” Cass murmured. “All of you.”

Ash’s stomach fluttered, and when Cass kissed his lips again, it was deep and soft at the same time. They kissed until Ash was breathless, and then he tilted his head back with a moan as Cass lowered his mouth to Ash’s throat, lazily tracing his lips down Ash’s neck to his exposed collarbone.

It all felt overwhelming in the best way.

“Cass . . .”

“Hmm?” Cass paused and lifted his eyes. His mouth was slightly parted, his tongue peeking out to wet his lips.

Ash closed his eyes and groaned as heat surged through his chest and down low into his groin.

Okay, so he’d lied. It *was* intensely arousing. It’d just been a slow burn, and now the flames had been fed and wanted to burst to life, and—

Cass’s lips touched him again with a warm hum, and Cass shifted above him, wedging one leg between Ash and the back of the couch while the other slipped between Ash’s thighs, pushing his knees apart.

He took a long, slow breath in as Cass inched downward, pressing languid kisses along his sternum. Each one felt hotter than the last, searing

his skin, even though Cass seemed to be deliberately soft and light. And when Cass finally took one of Ash's nipples into his mouth for the first time, his tongue teasing the stiff bud, Ash gasped an "oh god" and then moaned, muffling the sound as best he could into his elbow. Sparks shot through him, all the way down to his toes, and his cock pulsed with need.

He pushed his head back, screwing his eyes shut as Cass continued pleasuring him, alternating between flicking and sucking and maybe something where he grazed his teeth lightly over Ash's sensitive skin. Just when he felt like everything was maybe too much, Cass switched to the other nipple and gave it the same attention.

Ash moaned and writhed and made some other noise that sounded suspiciously like a whimper. He dropped his hand to Cass's shoulder and squeezed encouragingly.

"Fuck, Cass . . . please . . ."

He wasn't even sure why the curse had slipped out or what he was begging for. But Cass gave it to him anyway, his hand slipping gently down between them, rubbing over top of Ash's sweatpants along Ash's outer thigh, then shifting inward and upward. Stopping just before he touched the spot Ash really, *really* wanted him to touch. And even that—that tease—was exactly right.

Ash groaned and brought both arms up to cover his eyes.

Cass paused and lifted his mouth off of Ash's chest, breathing heavily against him. "Is this all okay?" he asked. "Touching you like this?"

Without waiting for a response, he teased Ash again, caressing down to Ash's knee and then back up and inward. Ash's shaft throbbed eagerly, and he nodded.

"Yes, yes, yes."

"And if I wanted to . . ." Cass trailed off for a good few seconds, kissing a path down Ash's pec to his stomach. He stopped again just below Ash's bellybutton, his breath hot against Ash's skin. "If I wanted to touch you more?" he said. "If I wanted to make you come?"

Ash sucked in a breath and forced his eyes back open. Cass's chin rested on Ash's stomach, and he gazed up at Ash, his cheeks flushed and his lips red and swollen.

Cass smiled softly and kissed Ash's stomach. "Can I make you come?"

His fingers inched upward even more, brushing the underside of Ash's cock through the thin fabric of his sweats, and without warning, the fire

inside him burst to life again, hot and desperate. Ash threw his head back with a rough moan.

"Yes, yes. God, yes, please."

And he'd had *no* idea. Not even in his most lascivious dreams had he imagined it could be so good.

Cass's hand slipped under the waistband of Ash's sweatpants, his palm flattening down Ash's erection before wrapping around him. At the same time, he lowered his mouth to Ash's stomach and kissed him again, smiling against his skin.

"Let me know what you like," Cass said softly, and he started pumping slowly, firmly, confidently. As though he already knew *exactly* what Ash liked.

Tendrils of heat and desire coursed through him, a hot pressure immediately building in his groin. He moaned, and his hips bucked up to meet Cass's hand.

"Mmm, god, yeah. Just like that," Ash breathed. "Like that. Perfect."

He felt himself drifting closer and closer to the edge, and it was so different, so much fuller and more intense and real than when he'd touched himself. Cass continued stroking him, slowly and deliberately, then speeding up a little as Ash's breathing became shallower. He moaned and cursed, and his hands found Cass's shoulders, squeezing insistently.

"Cass, mmm, I . . . I think I'm close."

"I've got you," Cass murmured, and a second later, a wet warmth enveloped the head of Ash's cock.

Heat surged through him, and his eyes screwed shut tighter. "Oh, fuck. Cass—"

He pushed his head back into the couch, gasping for breath. Cass's hand continued working him as Cass's mouth took him in more and more with each stroke. Pressure and heat and arousal built up and pulsed and grew. Then, in a burst of relief and the sweetest, most overwhelming pleasure Ash had ever felt, he came hard, pulsing his release into Cass's mouth.

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*Dad (Thursday, April 20, 2023 – 7:45 p.m.):* We made it. Trip was good, not much traffic. Your mom is doing great and said to tell you so you wouldn't worry

*Dad (7:46 p.m.):* We're heading down for dinner at the hotel restaurant and then to bed early

*Dad (7:46 p.m.):* You mom says to tell you she loves you. I love you too. Have a good time, and tell Ash we said hi

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# Chapter Forty-Four

## Cass

ASH'S BODY SHUDDERED AS he came, Cass's name on his lips.

Cass thought it was maybe one of the most beautiful things he'd ever experienced.

He swallowed as he let Ash's spent erection slip from his mouth, and he closed his eyes, scooted up along Ash's body, and lowered his forehead to rest on Ash's chest. He could feel how hard Ash's heart was thrumming, and he was sure his was doing the same.

After a few seconds, Ash groaned and rubbed one hand down Cass's upper back. "Mmm, wow," he said, his voice thick and rough. "That was incredible."

With a lazy, contented smile, Cass kissed Ash's skin, then planted slow kisses up the rest of Ash's chest and along the side of his neck until he reached Ash's lips. Propping himself up on one arm, he brought his other hand up and cupped Ash's cheek. He pressed a kiss to Ash's forehead and then his nose and each of his cheeks before capturing Ash's mouth in a more lingering kiss.

They both smiled into it, and Cass hummed as he pushed himself up. Ash closed his eyes and let his head fall sideways with a quiet sigh.

It was beautiful. Ash was beautiful. So, so beautiful.

And unlike every time they'd messed around on a video call or the phone, this time, Cass could do what he'd always, always wanted to afterward.

He gathered Ash up in his arms and placed more of those same gentle, loving kisses on Ash's cheeks and mouth and forehead, and then he hugged

his boyfriend, burying his head into the crook of Ash's neck.

That was beautiful too. The warmth and smoothness of Ash's bare skin against Cass's cheek. The way Ash clung to him, his arms looped around Cass's waist. The feel of Ash's breath ruffling his hair.

It was perfect.



HOURS PASSED. THEY CUDDLED more, talked a little about nothing of much importance. Eventually, they put on a movie, though they got distracted partway through and ended up turning it off in favor of a heated make-out session.

When it got late and Ash's eyes began to droop, Cass kissed him one last time and ran his hand through Ash's hair. "Bedtime, huh?"

"Mmm, maybe, yeah," Ash agreed, though he slumped against Cass on the couch like that was the most comfortable place in the world to be.

Cass laughed lightly. "Just tell me where the pillows and stuff are, and I'll make up my bed here. You can— What?"

Ash had lifted his eyes and was frowning. He shook his head. "You want to sleep out here?"

"Well, I figured that was the plan," Cass admitted. "Am I wrong?"

Ash didn't answer right away. Instead, he collapsed back into Cass, his head resting right in the middle of Cass's chest. Cass dropped a kiss into his hair.

"What are you thinking?" he asked quietly.

Ash set his hand on Cass's thigh, then pushed himself up and lifted his chin. He smiled lazily, obviously sleepy. "I'm thinking we should have already talked about this, and I feel a little guilty that we didn't." Ash stood, slipping his hand into Cass's, and he tugged gently. "Come to bed with me."

The words sent a rush of warmth to Cass's chest, and he let Ash pull him up off the couch before wrapping his arms around Ash's waist. "Are you sure?"

"Well, as long as you don't snore too loudly. You'll wake Bri, and that would be bad."

Cass laughed. "I don't think I snore."

"Good, then it's settled," Ash said matter-of-factly. He laughed lightly, but then looked down, his smile falling. "I'm sorry, we really should have talked

about this earlier. I trust you, and I trust you with Bri. And I want you there with me tonight. I want you to hold me."

"I want that too," Cass murmured. He brought his hand up and touched Ash's cheek, and he felt as Ash smiled under his palm. "God, I love that." The words escaped his lips before he could stop them, and Ash immediately lifted his eyes.

"What? You love what?"

There was a depth and emotion to Ash's expression that Cass couldn't fully interpret, but he wasn't about to deny anything, either, so he leaned in, kissed Ash's lips softly, and said, "I love when you smile like that."

Ash dropped his chin again, and his cheeks turned pink. He didn't say anything in response, though Cass was quite sure Ash was feeling a lot of things then. He slipped his hand back into Ash's and gave it a squeeze.

"Mind if I take a quick shower?" he asked.

"Oh, right, yeah. Let me just brush my teeth real quick, then the bathroom is all yours?" When Cass nodded, Ash added, "And just be quiet when you come in, since Bri's sleeping. You really, *really* don't want to wake her in the middle of the night."

"Understood," Cass said, grinning.

They kissed once more, and then Ash headed down the hallway toward the bathroom while Cass gathered his duffle bag from its spot near the front door and took a moment to check his text messages. He only had two, both sent hours ago from his dad and both good news.

> *Dad (9:09 p.m.):* Your mom just fell asleep. She's having a great time so far. She ate a good dinner and seems very happy

> *Dad (9:10 p.m.):* I know you're worrying, so just wanted to keep you updated. Love you

He *had* been worrying off and on, though he'd kept himself distracted enough most of the evening. Still, he was glad his dad's messages continued to be positive. It was much too late to message back tonight, so he told himself he'd do it in the morning, or maybe even take a few minutes then to call and talk to his mom.

About a half hour later, he tiptoed into the dark bedroom, closing the door behind him. Enough moonlight peeked in through the shutters that he could see the outline of Ash's bed pushed up against the far wall and Bri's crib off

to the left. Ash was curled up on his side, his head resting lightly on his pillow and the comforter pulled partway up his shoulders. His breathing was slow and rhythmical, as though he was already asleep, and for the shortest moment, Cass felt like he was intruding.

He'd never shared a bed with anyone before, at least not since sleepovers at his friends' houses when he was a young child, and until Ash had invited him, he'd been sure his sleeping accommodation for the weekend was the living room couch. Not because he thought they weren't ready for this level of intimacy—god, no, if anything, Cass was craving this more than he wanted to admit—but because of how much trust Ash was showing in him, letting him in this space that wasn't *just* Ash's bedroom. His niece slept here too.

Cass silently padded over to the right side of the bed, set his phone down on the nightstand, and then stood there for another moment, gazing at his boyfriend.

Ash was indeed asleep, his lips parted slightly and his chest rising and falling with a clear, slow rhythm. Even in his sleep, he was beautiful.

Carefully, trying not to wake him, Cass lifted the comforter and crawled underneath, settling on "his" side of the queen-size bed. He lay on his back for a moment, as still as possible, and he closed his eyes. The warmth of Ash's body next to him felt familiar and yet not, like everything they'd done together the whole afternoon and evening, and in an instant, all he wanted was to gather Ash up in his arms and hold him, be as close as possible, surrounded by all that warmth and all the joy and contentment of knowing they were finally together again.

*"I want you to hold me."*

Ash's words replayed in his head, and he could still hear all the emotion and need in his boyfriend's voice. His heart thrumming in his chest, Cass turned slowly onto his side, and he scooted over, inch by inch, until his body framed Ash's. Ash let out a quiet hum and snuggled back into Cass.

"Mmm, you're warm," Ash mumbled sleepily.

Cass dropped a soft kiss on Ash's shoulder, then slipped his arm around Ash's midsection and held him close. Ash sighed contentedly.

It was perfect just like that.

Cass let his head settle on the pillow, then he brushed another kiss against Ash's warm skin. "Good night, Ash," he whispered.

He was sure he felt Ash smile.

"Good night, Cass."

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*Grant (Friday, April 21, 2023 – 8:32 a.m.):* Yo, 9am is good to pick up Bri tomorrow, yeah? The zoo opens at 9:30. Mei signed us up for some behind the scenes tour and then an art class

*Grant (8:34 a.m.):* Oh, and her family is visiting from Beijing over the summer. Dude, I'm going to meet her parents! That's like a whole new level of serious, right? I think I love her

*Grant (8:34 a.m.):* Is that weird that I told u that before I told her?

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# Chapter Forty-Five

## Ash

BRI LAUGHED AND GIGGLED and squealed, “Again! Again!” So, for the dozenth or so time, Ash counted down, “Three, two, one,” and he and Cass lifted her together, each of her hands holding one of theirs. She jumped as they lifted, like she was trying to propel herself even higher. Then they lowered her feet back to the ground gently, keeping hold of her hands, and she giggled again and jumped up and down. “Again! Again!”

Ash glanced over at Cass, and as their eyes met, he smiled. It was a smile that he felt with his whole being.

He was happy. Just like he’d been the night before and earlier that morning, when he’d woken up in Cass’s arms.

Cass grinned back. “Okay, one more time, Bri. Ready?”

“Yay yay yay! Yes, okay!”

“Can you count down this time?”

Ash bit his lip, stifling a laugh.

Bri jumped preemptively and kept bouncing, holding both of their hands tight. “Yes! Yes! Count! One! Go!”

They lifted her off the ground again, and she continued to giggle and squeal the whole time.

The trail wasn’t terribly busy, which was a bit of a miracle, Ash thought, since Snow Lake Trail was one of the most popular trails in the area and the weather was perfect—mostly sunny and around sixty degrees with a light breeze. It was also a miracle that Bri was *still* going strong, even after over

two and a half miles up the mountain. Sure, she was quite the seasoned hiker for her age, not yet two years old, but she hadn't asked even once to be carried. She'd gleefully hopped up the steep steps at the beginning of the trail, traversed paths made almost entirely of sheared rock, and, under the quickly warming sun of the exposed mountainside, made easy work of the switchbacks before the peak.

They'd just started down the forested path into the valley, sneaking glimpses of Snow Lake through the pines, when a decade-and-a-half-old memory flitted through Ash's mind. He slowed and then stopped, Bri and Cass stopping with him, and he gazed down at a spot off the trail to his right.

Here. It was here, they'd had lunch. Him and his sister and his mom and dad. They'd laid out a blanket on the mostly flat area between two massive tree roots, and they'd eaten sandwiches and fruit and played some silly word game. His sister had won, because she usually did. Then she'd stood *right there*, right on that boulder now half covered in pine needles, and she'd stared out at the deep-blue lake with awe.

*"This has to be the most beautiful place in the world,"* she'd said. *"Ash, come up here, look!"*

A tear formed in the corner of his eye, and he reached up with his free hand and wiped it away.

"Un-ca Ash okay?" Bri had let go of Cass's hand, but still held Ash's, and she moved closer and hugged his leg.

With a quiet sniffle, he knelt down next to her, picked her up, and smiled as he kissed her cheek. "Yeah, sweet girl, I'm okay. Just remembering," he said.

"Oh, I see, I see," Bri said, one of her new phrases she'd picked up from somewhere. She wrapped one arm around his neck and then pointed out toward the lake. "Ohhhh, Un-ca Ash, look! Sooooo pretty water!"

"Yeah, isn't it?" Another tear threatened to fall, but he blinked it back as he felt Cass step up behind him. Cass's hand slipped around Ash's waist, and he shifted Bri on his hip and leaned into Cass. Tilting his head back, he said, "Can we stop here for a bit? This spot is kinda perfect for an early lunch, yeah?"

Cass brushed a soft kiss on Ash's cheek. "Looks like a good spot to me." He didn't say anything more, just let his hand drift across Ash's lower back once before kissing his cheek again.

Together, they stepped off the trail and set up their picnic spot right in that same little alcove between the tree roots. They laid out a blanket big enough for the three of them and pulled containers of food and bottles of water out of their backpacks. Ash started assembling sandwiches, while Cass portioned out some quartered strawberries onto each of three paper plates. Bri gathered up an armful of rocks, plopped down on the blanket, and began lining up the small stones on one of the tree roots beside her.

It was still the perfect spot, even so many years later, and Ash found himself staring out at the lake, hearing his sister's voice, feeling as she'd tugged his hand to pull him up onto the rock with her. He swallowed hard as Cass's knee bumped his.

"Everything okay?" Cass asked gently.

With a smile that wasn't entirely sad, he looked over at his boyfriend. "We stopped here, right at this spot," he explained. Blinking, he glanced at Bri. She wasn't paying attention at all, which was probably good, because Ash was about ninety percent sure he'd be crying in a moment or two. He bit his lip and continued. "I think we were seven or eight. Ashlynn chose this spot, and she stood right there"—he pointed at the rock—"and . . ."

Sure enough, one tear slipped down his cheek, and then another. Cass moved closer and slipped his arm around Ash's waist.

And without any words at all, Cass told him everything he needed to know.

*He was not alone.*

Ash sighed slowly and let himself lean into his boyfriend. "I can still see her. She was so happy. She *loved* it here so much." He paused again, and Cass squeezed him gently, encouraging him to keep going. He dropped his chin. "You know, I was worried for a while that I'd lose her completely. That I'd forget her voice and her face and—and *her*. But I have pieces of her in so many memories, and now—" He sucked in a breath. "Now that I'm able to let myself think about her, I can relive those memories . . . I haven't lost her. I *won't* forget."

There was so much more he wanted to say.

He wanted to thank Cass—because it was actually Cass who'd given him that space, very early on, to talk freely about Ashlynn. Cass had just been there any time Ash had needed it, listening, supporting him as he worked his way through that part of the grieving process.

He wanted to tell Bri all about her mom and what an amazing person she'd been—smart and kind and loving, free-spirited and bold. All of those things he saw and loved so much in Bri.

And he wanted to keep reliving this one specific memory, his memory of that day with his whole family on this very mountain in this very spot.

But he thought maybe all of that would be too much right now. There would be time for it next time. They could come here again, and when Bri was old enough, he could show her this spot, tell her how her mom sat right where Bri was sitting now, gazing out at the lake.

It really *was* the most beautiful spot in the world, he thought. And he suddenly felt connected to his sister here in a way he hadn't anywhere else since she'd passed.

"Hey, Bri, sweet girl," he said. She turned to him with her big, gorgeous blue eyes that looked so, so much like her mother's. "Hey, can you come here and sit with me and Cass for a minute?"

"Oh, yes, yes, sure," she said, and she took a moment to set down the last of her rocks in the line on the tree root. Then she crawled over into Ash's lap and snuggled right up against his chest.

With a smile, he hugged her close and shut his eyes, tilting his head to rest against Cass's. Lips brushed his temple as Cass's arms tightened around him. And just like the night before, he felt surrounded by a deep warmth and so much love.

He sighed and looked out through the trees toward the lake again.

"This has to be the most beautiful place in the world," he said.

Cass squeezed him gently, and Bri lifted her eyes and said, "Yes! So pretty water! See!" She pointed out to the lake, which made Ash smile again.

"I see, sweet girl. I see."

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*Dad (Friday, April 21, 2023 – 7:02 p.m.):* Your mother wanted me to tell you I don’t do her makeup as well as you

*Dad (7:03 p.m.):* But she’s proud of me for trying, says I should practice more

*Dad (7:03 p.m.):* Symphony is starting soon, and we’re here in our seats. She’s happy and doing well

*Dad (7:04 p.m.):* Talk to you tomorrow :)

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# Chapter Forty-Six

## Cass

*Ash (10:05 p.m.):* Sorry, she's still not falling asleep

*Ash (10:06 p.m.):* Guess we let her sleep too long after we got home earlier

*Cass (10:06 p.m.):* Can't imagine what we were doing that we let her sleep so long

*Ash (10:08 p.m.):* Oh I can

*Cass (10:08 p.m.):* xD

WHEN ASH DIDN'T TEXT again right away, Cass set his phone down on the coffee table and closed his eyes, hooking his arm back behind his head to fluff the couch pillow. Another of Bri's muffled cries from the bedroom told him he might be out here in the living room alone for some time still, and he was tired enough that he thought he might doze off.

He'd had the best day. Ash hadn't been kidding when he'd described how beautiful the trails were up here, and the whole hike and their picnic overlooking the lake had been incredible in so many ways. Hell, even the drive there and back, about an hour each way, had been wonderful—the scenery was amazing, and he'd gotten to hold Ash's hand almost the whole

time. They'd talked, too. Mostly about hiking and all the trails in the area that Ash had taken Bri to. But then, on the way home, when Bri had fallen asleep, Ash had opened up even more about his family, his sister, how he'd felt going back to that hiking trail where he had such fond memories.

It had been a different form of intimacy and vulnerability. Cass had appreciated every second of it.

He'd appreciated every second of this trip, actually, and being here with Ash, being allowed and able to have all this intimacy that he craved so much, was only another reminder of how temporary this was.

On Monday, he'd have to pack his stuff up and go back home. Yes, they'd talk and text every day, like they had been doing for months now. But this was so different. So much better. So much more than he'd ever realized it could be.

He honestly wasn't sure how he was going to do it. He *would*, because he had to. His mom and dad needed him, and he couldn't just abandon them. But there was no doubt, already, that it was going to be much, much harder than last time.

Thankfully, his depressing train of thought was interrupted by his phone buzzing from the coffee table. He turned onto his side, reached over to pick it up, and swiped to unlock the screen.

*Ash (10:21 p.m.):* She might be asleep. Gonna give her a couple more minutes just in case

*Ash (10:21 p.m.):* Don't want to be interrupted, after all ;)

Cass almost groaned at the implication of Ash's text, a flush of heat rushing straight to his groin in anticipation.

*Cass (10:22 p.m.):* You promised to show me both choices

*Ash (10:22 p.m.):* I did

This time, he did groan, and he lifted up his free arm to cover his eyes as he shifted onto his back, trying to ignore how his body was reacting.

Ash was taking him swimming tomorrow. That was the one thing they'd managed to plan for their day while Bri would be gone with Grant and his girlfriend, Mei, at the zoo. When Cass had mentioned he hadn't brought swim trunks, Ash had offered to let him borrow some. That had led to a discussion

about swimwear and Ash's preference, as an ex-competitive swimmer, for wearing something more streamlined than standard swim trunks. And *that* had made Cass quite curious.

He needed a distraction until Ash could join him.

Sitting up, he frowned and scanned the room. The dishes were done, and the living room was clean; he'd taken care of all of that earlier, after they'd finished eating. His gaze landed on his backpack, which sat by the front door. He *could* try to get some schoolwork done. He had an assignment due on Monday and then another one due Tuesday night. But he had exactly zero motivation to do that right now.

Sighing, he collapsed back onto the couch and closed his eyes again.

He must have drifted off, because the next thing he knew, a warm, heavy weight was draping over him, hands snaking up under his shirt. He groaned and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend as Ash's lips grazed along his cheek.

"Sorry to make you wait so long," Ash whispered in his ear.

"Mmm, glad you're here now. She's asleep?"

"Mm-hmm, yep, *finally*," Ash answered. He shifted until he was stretched out completely on top of Cass, both of his hands resting on Cass's chest. Then he wasted no more time, his lips capturing Cass's in a gentle caress.

Despite the obvious heat and desire, everything remained soft, with a sort of teasing slowness to it. Ash's kisses deepened and then backed off, leaving Cass to chase him for more. He slipped a hand under Ash's shirt, groaning as he smoothed his palm up Ash's back and down again. And in response, Ash broke the kiss and lowered his mouth to Cass's throat.

Sparks shot through him with each touch of Ash's lips, and the second time he groaned, pressing both hands into Ash's lower back, he felt a puff of warm air against his neck.

"I love that sound," Ash said before kissing the same spot on Cass's neck again. He propped himself up on one arm, his other hand resting on Cass's chest, and a silly, teasing grin grew on his lips. "Ready?"

"Oh, yeah, definitely."

Ash grinned again, leaned in and kissed Cass's lips one more time, then pushed himself up to his feet. "I'll be right back," he said, and he disappeared down the hallway.

Cass sat up, unsure of exactly what to expect, and he tilted his head back and sideways to watch as Ash slipped into the bedroom, mostly closing the door behind him. Not more than a minute later, the door opened again, and

Ash came out. Shirtless. Cass's pulse sped up, and he shifted for a better view as Ash headed toward him, that teasing grin still on his face.

Ash reached the end of the hallway and paused, draping a colorful beach towel over his shoulders.

"So, these are one of the pairs of swim trunks I have." He turned around slowly, showing off a pair of bright-blue swim shorts.

"Mm-hmm," Cass mumbled, taking in the view as Ash continued turning. He only barely glanced at the shorts, his eyes drawn to the lean, taut muscles of Ash's arms, chest, and back and how the shorts accentuated the curves of Ash's ass. He swallowed hard, his gaze flitting back up to meet Ash's.

"You like these?" Ash asked, his eyes glinting with playfulness.

Cass's stomach swooped, and he nodded. "I do."

Ash sauntered over around the couch and stopped just on the other side of the coffee table, out of Cass's reach. Then, letting the towel fall to the ground, Ash did another slow turn. Cass's heart raced even more when Ash hooked his fingers into the waistband of the shorts in a way that was now *quite* familiar.

He groaned as Ash paused with his back to him.

"They're pretty comfortable, I guess," Ash said casually. "But, like I told you yesterday, I prefer swim briefs." He tugged the shorts down just enough that Cass could see a darker blue material underneath. "Do you want to see those now?"

Cass sucked in a sharp breath and nodded again, heat rushing to his cheeks. "Yeah, I do."

Ash's confident, seductive smile—one that Cass had gotten to know quite well from their video calls over the last few months—somehow felt more real, more captivating now that Cass was in the same room, only a few feet away. He held his breath, his hand pressing into his thigh and inching upward, as Ash bent over slightly. The bright blue of the swim trunks tightened over his perfectly curved ass before slipping down to reveal a pair of skintight navy swim briefs.

"Ohhhh." Cass's shaft throbbed, and his hand shifted upward to adjust himself as he inhaled a sharp breath.

Ash played it out like he often did on their video calls, bending all the way over to push the shorts to the ground, then stepping out of them slowly, running his hands back up the outsides of his legs and to his hips as he straightened.

Cass groaned as he watched, his hard length swelling under his palm. Ash glanced back at him over his shoulder, a tease still glinting in his eyes.

“What do you think?”

Then Ash turned around, letting his hands smooth up his chest and down again, slowly, taunting Cass with every inch. The briefs clung to his frame, dipping low enough in front that Cass could see the well-defined muscles in Ash’s abs and the V of his hips. Their eyes met, and Cass shook his head, unable to speak.

He lifted his hand and reached out toward Ash, an ache in his chest, and without any hesitation, Ash came to him. Their fingers threaded together, and Cass scooted to sit closer to the edge of the couch, looking up at his boyfriend. Ash’s smile seemed to soften, and he crooked his head a bit.

“They’re comfortable. Soft material,” Ash said, and his tongue peeked out of his mouth to wet his lips.

Cass swallowed hard again. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, here, feel.” Ash guided Cass’s hand to his hip, flattening Cass’s palm over the material. Cass closed his eyes and let Ash move his hand inward until he felt Ash’s straining erection throb under his palm. “There, see”—Ash pushed Cass’s hand down, stroking him over the top of the briefs—“good, right?”

Cass couldn’t speak, but he took over, leaning forward to rest his head in the crease of Ash’s hip and thigh as he stroked Ash again. With a grunt, Ash shifted both hands to Cass’s shoulders as though needing to steady himself.

“Oh, fuck, Cass,” Ash mumbled, and then with a groan, he tugged at Cass’s shirt. “Take this off.”

Cass straightened up and quickly complied, and at the same time, Ash’s fingers found the waistband of Cass’s sweatpants.

“These too.”

The neediness in Ash’s tone sent a warm shiver through him, and Cass tossed his shirt over the back of the couch and then immediately tugged off his sweats as well, leaving him in only his plain black boxers.

The next thing he knew, Ash was on top of him, pushing him to lie back on the couch. Ash’s knees settled between Cass’s legs, and he flattened his palms against Cass’s stomach, biting his lower lip as he rubbed upward. With a deep moan, Cass screwed his eyes shut and pressed his head back into the couch pillows.

God, he was hot, and the aching pressure growing in his groin throbbed with need.

He opened his eyes halfway, breathing heavily, and watched as Ash lowered his mouth to Cass's neck. The wet heat of Ash's kisses made him writhe with pleasure. "God, yeah. Right there," he rasped, and he felt Ash smile against him.

Ash continued, touching Cass everywhere, using his fingers and his mouth and his tongue, and it was all intense and needy and sensual.

He loved it.

He loved Ash's playfulness.

He loved Ash's confidence.

He loved what Ash was doing to him.

And when Ash pushed himself up a minute later, gazing softly down at him, one hand now stroking teasingly over the straining bulge in Cass's boxers, the words he'd known for so long but hadn't let himself admit popped into his head.

*He loved Ash.*

Cass swallowed hard as a ripple of warmth and need coursed through him, and then he slid his hands up Ash's chest to frame his face and tugged Ash down to him. And they kissed again. This time, it was slower, gentler, and so full of love.

God. He *was* in love. Completely and totally and unconditionally.

His chest tightened, and he broke the kiss and let his head drop back into the pillows again as Ash stroked his shaft. Kisses danced down his chest, pausing as Ash's tongue dipped into his bellybutton. His swollen erection throbbed in Ash's hand again, and another deep, throaty moan escaped him.

"Please, Ash," he begged, lifting a hand to thread his fingers through Ash's hair. Ash let out a soft breath, and then he continued down lower, marking Cass's skin with a trail of kisses as his fingers slipped under the hem of Cass's boxers and pushed them down.

Before he could even register that he was now completely naked in front of his boyfriend for the first time, Ash's hand wrapped around the base of his shaft, and any and all thoughts he might have had vanished into pure pleasure. His hands gripped the couch, and he pushed his head back against the cushion with a deep moan that he didn't even try to keep quiet. Vaguely, he was aware of Ash shifting lower between his legs, and a sharp jolt shot through him as a tight, wet warmth engulfed the head of his dick.

He might have cursed. Might have moaned again and whimpered. And he was fairly sure he begged for Ash to keep going. Everything was a blur of

pure, blissful pleasure. The pressure and arousal heightened and grew, pushing him to a new edge.

Cass opened his eyes, needing to watch. The sight was almost too overwhelming. Ash's head bobbing up and down as he took more and more of Cass's erection into his mouth, the way his cheeks hollowed as he came up, the tease of his fingers along Cass's stomach. With another low groan, Cass reached forward and covered Ash's hand with his own. Then he closed his eyes and sucked in a breath as Ash did something else with his tongue.

"Oh god, oh fuck," Cass mumbled. He squeezed Ash's hand. "Ash, ahh, I'm—"

He didn't get to finish the warning before he came, a burst of pleasure and relief pulsing through his whole body. It seemed to last forever, a white-hot brilliance that brought him to a new high he'd never, ever thought possible.

After the final throb, his body shuddered, and he groaned and blew out a long, shaky breath as he felt his dick slip out of Ash's mouth. He dropped his head back onto the couch cushion in exhaustion.

There was a quiet laugh from his boyfriend, and then Ash's hand let go of his and caressed out to his hip, pressing into him with some sort of intention. "How was that?" Ash asked, though his voice sounded strained.

With effort, Cass opened his eyes and watched as Ash sat up slightly, kneeling on the couch between Cass's open legs. Ash let out a soft whimper and tilted his head back, his hand moving fast up and down his length. He'd pushed his swim briefs down, and his long, thick shaft was so perfectly swollen and hard, a drop of precum leaking from his tip.

"You were perfect," Cass said, and he groaned when Ash's hand pressed into him again. "God, Ash. You *are* perfect. Beautiful. Gorgeous."

Ash moaned at the praise and sped up his fist only briefly before his whole body seemed to tighten. He leaned forward over Cass, dropping his chin down, and he came, warm liquid spurting out over his fist and onto Cass's stomach. Breathing hard, Ash let his forehead fall to rest against Cass's shoulder, and his body trembled.

Cass loved that, too.

He lifted one hand and softly caressed Ash's back, closing his eyes.

"Sorry, I hope that was okay," Ash mumbled against him.

"It was," Cass said simply. "It was amazing." He rubbed Ash's back again and then bent forward to brush a kiss on Ash's temple.

Ash turned his head and half opened his eyes, a tired smile on his lips. "I'm so glad you're here," he murmured, and he stretched up slightly until

their lips met again in another of those slow, gentle, loving kisses.

Cass lingered in it, sure that he never, ever wanted to let go.

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*Shaina (Sunday, April 23, 2023 – 10:46 p.m.):* End of the weekend check-in!

*Shaina (10:47 p.m.):* How’d it go?

*Shaina (10:57 p.m.):* Ohhhh wait, he leaves tomorrow, doesn’t he? Ahhh, ignore me until then!

*Shaina (10:57 p.m.):* and then please call me!

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# Chapter Forty-Seven

## Ash

ASH WOKE UP MONDAY morning to the quiet sound of rain outside and the tickle of Cass's stubble on the back of his neck. Warmth and softness surrounded him, and he smiled to himself as he breathed in deeply.

What a wonderful weekend they'd had. Every moment, every touch, every kiss had been a beautiful affirmation of how much their relationship had grown.

He only wished Cass didn't have to leave today.

And even though he knew it was going to hurt to see Cass leave, he felt nothing but love and hope and this strong sense of contentedness. For the first time in a long, long time, he was looking forward to the future.

With a sigh, he turned around in Cass's arms, careful not to wake him. His hands settled gently on Cass's chest, and he bit his lower lip as he studied Cass's face. Even in his sleep, Cass looked kind. And caring. And gorgeous.

And he was Ash's. Somehow, Ash had lucked into finding this beautiful, incredible man. Or, actually, Cass had found him, caught him when he'd been falling into a deep, dark abyss of despair and grief, and helped him to *feel* again.

Smiling softly, Ash scooted a little closer and let his fingers brush along Cass's jaw, chasing the touch with a soft kiss. Cass barely stirred, and so Ash kissed him again, lightly, teasingly. This time, Cass hummed, the sound

rumbling deep in his throat, and he shifted a little, his arm tightening around Ash's midsection.

"Mmm, good morning," Cass said, his voice appropriately low to avoid waking Bri.

Ash kissed Cass's jaw and then settled his head against Cass's chest. "Good morning. I'd say sorry to wake you, but I'm not."

Cass laughed quietly. "I'm glad you did." He nuzzled the top of Ash's head and then hummed again. "Mmm, I want *every* single minute today."

Ash nodded silently and then tilted his chin up, and they kissed with the slow laziness of early morning. When he pulled back a moment later, he watched a soft smile grow on Cass's lips. They kissed and talked quietly and kissed some more, and that feeling that he was happy and was going to be okay continued to surround Ash with every touch they shared. It was good. He was good.

When Bri finally woke up, it was nearly seven thirty. Cass hopped out of bed and plucked Bri from her crib, spinning her around and then blowing a raspberry on her belly as she giggled happily. Ash pushed himself up out of bed, too, and then followed as they headed to the kitchen to make breakfast.

The remaining few hours before Cass had to leave went much, much too fast. At about 9:45 a.m., Cass excused himself to pack up his stuff and make sure he had everything. Bri paused her playing and came and sat in Ash's lap on the couch.

"Cass go home?" she asked quietly, looking up at him with sad eyes.

Ash forced himself not to frown. Instead, he gave her a gentle nod and said, "Yeah, he has to go back home to help take care of his mom. But he's going to call us and talk to us on the phone, like he always does."

"Oh, yes, yes. Talk phone." Bri didn't exactly smile, but she seemed to understand, at least as much as an almost-two-year-old could, that this "goodbye" wasn't *really* "goodbye."

Cass came back out of the bedroom a minute later, his duffle bag hanging from one shoulder, and Bri jumped off Ash's lap and ran over, her arms outstretched.

"Up! Cass up! Hug!"

Without hesitation, Cass leaned over and scooped her up, grinning. "Ah, Bri, thank you for letting me stay here with you. I had such a great time!"

Bri brought her hands up to either side of Cass's face and then placed one of her big, wet kisses on his nose with a loud "Mwah!"

Cass laughed and then kissed her cheek. "Thank you, sweet girl."

"Come back?" Bri asked, her expression shifting from joyful to serious.

Ash's heart ached as he watched Cass's eyes flicker with sadness. Bri didn't seem to notice, but Cass also didn't seem to know exactly what to say. They'd avoided talking about when "next time" would be, except for a loose mention of Cass possibly flying up for Ash's departmental graduation ceremony in June. Ash had been meaning to bring it up all morning, but he'd kept getting distracted by other things.

He cleared his throat, and Bri and Cass both turned to look at him. "We'll see Cass again soon, I know it," he said softly.

"Soon?" When Ash nodded, Bri grinned, bright and happy, and threw her arms around Cass's neck. "Yay yay yay!"

Cass laughed, but it was a tight, strained laugh. He glanced over at Ash, and when their eyes met, Cass's expression flickered again. Ash shook his head and gave Cass a hopeful smile.

"Hey, Bri, can you run and grab your diaper bag, sweetie?" Ash said.

"Yes, okay!" Bri agreed, and when Cass set her down, she took off toward the bedroom.

Cass's eyes were downcast, and his shoulders looked tight as he shoved his hands in his pockets. With a frown, Ash pushed himself up off the couch and stepped over to his boyfriend, wrapping his arms around Cass's midsection. Cass lifted his eyes, and he seemed to strain for a small smile.

"Sorry," Cass said. He let out a breath and then pulled his hands out of his pockets and rubbed them up and down Ash's arms. "I had such a good time. I just didn't realize how hard it would be to leave, especially not knowing when we'll see each other again."

"'Soon' isn't certain enough for you, huh?"

Cass laughed lightly. "I guess not."

For some reason, something in his laugh sounded off, and Ash made a split-second decision. He dropped his arms from around Cass and pulled out his phone. Then he opened up his email and skimmed through until he found what he was looking for: the schedules for finals, graduation, and the start of the summer quarter, when his master's program began. He smiled and looked back at Cass, who was watching him with one eyebrow raised.

"Graduation is June 6," he explained.

Cass nodded slowly. “Yeah, I still have to talk to my parents and see if I can come up for that.”

Ash slipped his phone back into his pocket and slid both hands up Cass’s chest. “Yeah, but since I’ll be finished with my finals that day, too, how about Bri and I plan to drive down to Redding the next day, regardless of whether you’re able to fly up. That way, even if you can’t come, we’ll still see each other again. We could stay for several days. I mean, if your parents don’t mind having us. My summer classes don’t start until the twentieth.”

“My parents won’t mind,” Cass said quickly, his voice rough with some emotion Ash couldn’t identify. He leaned in, and Ash met him in a soft kiss that maybe would have deepened if Bri hadn’t chosen that moment to come back into the room, dragging the diaper bag behind her and hugging Ollie the Octopus to her chest.

“Ready! Ready go!” she exclaimed, hauling the diaper bag right up to Ash’s feet and dropping it and Ollie there. She turned to Cass and reached up to grab his hand. “Cass go!”

With a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, Cass leaned over and picked Bri up again, settling her on his hip. He shifted his gaze back to Ash, and that flicker of sadness in his expression faded, replaced by what Ash just knew had to be love. Cass blinked and looked down at the floor.

“So June, then.”

“Yeah, we’ll make it happen,” Ash said, putting as much certainty and confidence into his voice as he could. He almost laughed as he realized how the two of them seemed to have switched roles, for whatever reason. Cass was always the more optimistic of them. But then, he remembered how difficult it had been when he’d been the one leaving Cass’s house last November.

The truth was, nothing about this long-distance relationship stuff was easy, and he definitely couldn’t blame Cass for having a hard time with it.

He stepped closer to Cass and let his fingers graze up Cass’s wrist and forearm. “We’ll make it work,” he said again.

This time, Cass’s expression softened, and he smiled and blinked and nodded. “Yeah, we will. June. Six or seven weeks.”

“Yep.”

“Soon!” Bri chimed in happily, bouncing on Cass’s hip.

That made Cass’s smile brighter, and he leaned in toward Ash for a light kiss.

“Ready?” Ash asked when they parted.

“Yeah.”

He bent down and picked up Bri’s diaper bag and Ollie the Octopus, grabbed his keys and wallet, and led Cass out of the apartment and to the parking garage.

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*Cass (Monday, April 24, 2023 – 4:13 p.m.):* Made it home. My parents aren't here yet, guess they got stuck in traffic

*Ash (4:14 p.m.):* Oh, yikes. Will your mom be okay?

*Cass (4:15 p.m.):* Dad says she's fine, so I assume so

*Ash (4:15 p.m.):* Good <3

*Ash (4:19 p.m.):* I miss you already. Call me tonight if you can

*Ash (4:19 p.m.):* We can work together on our school assignments that we neglected all weekend xD

*Cass (4:20 p.m.):* Ackkkkk, I forgot. Good idea



*Ash (Wednesday, May 10, 2023 – 7:41 p.m.):* Yes, call me in about an hour. I got a present for you

*Cass (7:41 p.m.):* For me??

*Ash (7:42 p.m.):* Yepppppppp ;)

*Cass (7:42 p.m.):* But it's your birthday xD

*Ash (7:43 p.m.):* Oh, don't worry. It's a present I'm also going to enjoy. A whole lot



*Cass (Monday, May 15, 2023 – 10:01 p.m.):* Sorry I missed your call

*Cass (10:01 p.m.):* Give me ten minutes, maybe

*Ash (10:02 p.m.):* Is she okay?

*Cass (10:03 p.m.):* Yeah but also no. She's still in a ton of pain. They said it's not a clot, so that's good news. They think it's "just" a muscle spasm

*Cass (10:03 p.m.):* They want to keep her overnight though bc her bp is sky high, which is bad, especially given the meds she's already on

*Ash (10:04 p.m.):* *hugs*

*Ash (10:04 p.m.):* Are you okay?

*Cass (10:04 p.m.):* No

*Cass (10:04 p.m.):* I'll call you in a few



*Ash (Tuesday, May 16, 2023 – 4:55 p.m.):* Home yet?

*Cass (5:23 p.m.):* Leaving hospital now

*Ash (5:24 p.m.):* Oh good

*Cass (6:46 p.m.):* Mom's settled in bed, she's super tired bc of the muscle relaxant they gave her. I have to cook and do laundry and clean and then I have a ton of homework to finish and a project due tomorrow. Sorry, I can't talk tonight

*Ash (6:47 p.m.):* Anything I can do to help?

*Ash (7:03 p.m.):* Sorry, that was sort of a stupid question, of course there's nothing I can do

*Ash (7:04 p.m.):* Take care of yourself, and know I'm thinking about you <3

*Cass (7:56 p.m.):* Thanks. I'll call you tomorrow



*Cass (Saturday, May 27, 2023 – 9:14 a.m.):* Hey. Sorry about all of the last week. Mom's finally feeling better, and I'm finally caught up with schoolwork

*Cass (9:14 a.m.):* I've missed talking to you

*Cass (9:15 a.m.):* Call me when you can

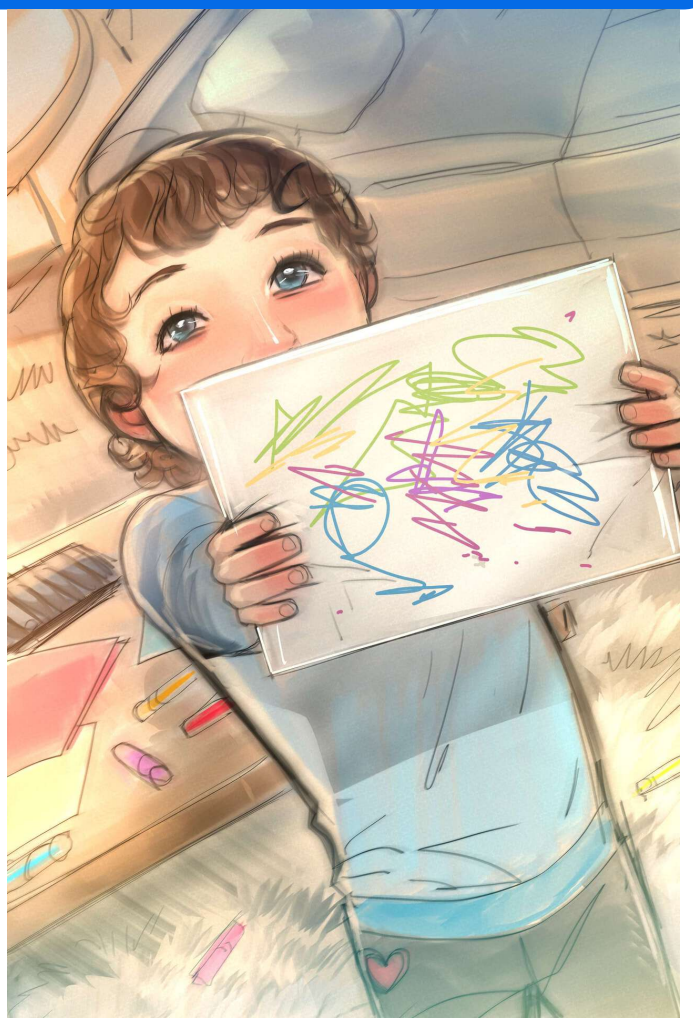


*Ash (Monday, June 5, 2023 – 12:30 p.m.):* One down, one to go?

*Cass (12:31 p.m.):* Yeah. It wasn't awful, but it wasn't amazing either. I'm sure I passed, but I feel like I could have done better, you know?

*Ash (12:32 p.m.):* I know the feeling. I'm sure you did better than you think <3

*Ash (12:33 p.m.):* Here's something to cheer you up. Bri drew a picture. She says it's the three of us together in the forest



*Cass (12:34 p.m.):* Ahhhh, oh gosh, she's adorable. Tell her I love it!

*Ash (12:35 p.m.):* She says, and I quote, "I wuv it too!"



*Cass (Tuesday, June 6, 2023 – 2:50 p.m.):* On the plane, but we're delayed, and they don't know how long it will be. Don't come to pick me up. I'll catch a Lyft to get there so you're not late. Can't wait to see you <3

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*Ash (Tuesday, June 6, 2023 – 3:40 p.m.):* Just finished my last final. It went well :) Going to pick up Bri, then meet up with Joanna and Henry before we head back to campus for the ceremony

*Ash (3:41 p.m.):* Hope you're in the air! See you soon!

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# Chapter Forty-Eight

## Cass

CASS GRIMACED INWARDLY AS he thanked the Lyft driver and hopped out of the car, shouldering his duffle bag. He gripped his phone in one hand and, frowning, glanced down at the time. His stomach immediately sank.

He was *late*. Like *late*, late. Like a good forty-five minutes late. And he wasn't entirely sure where he was going.

Spinning around, he quickly scanned the area where the driver had dropped him off. At the top of a short stairway to his right, there was a pop-up sign with balloons tied to it and an arrow pointing toward a large brick building. With another frown, he broke into a jog and took the steps two at a time, hoping the arrow was pointing him in the right direction. He sighed with relief when he got to the top step and saw the Alaska Airlines Arena sign over a set of red brick arches leading into the building. Several university staff members stood at the double doors, ushering in a few other latecomers.

He jogged the rest of the way over, shoved his phone into his pocket, and followed another person in through the doors. As soon as he stepped inside, he could hear a speaker talking about something related to the importance of education and shaping future generations, the sound carrying from the main arena. He didn't stop to try to listen, and instead, he followed the signs to the section where Henry, Joanna, and Bri were supposed to be sitting. By the time he entered through the hallway into the arena, located the rest of the group, and slipped into his seat next to Joanna and Bri, the

speaker, apparently a graduating student in the university's PhD program, had just finished and sat back down.

"Cass! Cass!" Bri whisper-squealed, crawling out of Joanna's arms and into Cass's lap. He quickly pushed his duffle bag onto the floor under his feet as she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. Then she leaned back a bit and planted one of her adorable kisses right on his nose with a loud "mwah!"

He couldn't help but smile, because Bri *always* made him smile. But his heart still raced and his stomach churned. He'd *almost* missed it. The delay at the airport in Redding, the additional delay once the plane had landed here in Seattle, and heavy traffic from the airport to campus had eaten into the entire several-hour buffer he *should* have had. And that had been making all of his *other* insecurities rear their ugly heads, too.

"Cass, it's so great to finally meet you," Joanna greeted as the announcer continued speaking on the stage.

Pushing away any negativity still wanting to surface—because now was *definitely* not the time for it—Cass looped one arm around Bri to hold her and twisted slightly, reaching out to offer his hand to Joanna and then to Henry, who leaned over from his seat on the other side of Joanna. "Mrs. Waller, Mr. Waller, it's great to finally meet you, too." He shook both of their hands and then settled back in his seat, shifting Bri so she was maybe more comfortable. "So sorry I was late," he added. "Our plane was stuck on the runway and there was traffic."

"You didn't miss much," Joanna said quietly, giving him a kind, knowing smile. "Bri has been talking about you nonstop, though."

"Cass! Cass here see Un-ca Ash!" Bri piped in, as though she'd heard her name. She bounced up and down in his lap, and that made him grin again.

"I'm *finally* here, huh?" he said with a light laugh.

"Yes! Yes! Un-ca Ash down there!" She pointed enthusiastically down toward where all the graduating students sat.

Joanna leaned in closer as the announcer began calling up students, starting with those receiving doctoral degrees. "Ash is in about the sixth row from the back, you see his cap?"

"Awwie! Awwie!" Bri bounced up and down, clapping again, and Cass had to suppress a laugh as he found his boyfriend. On the top of Ash's cap, he'd glued a paper painted with a blue octopus, just like Bri's stuffed toy.

As though Ash had heard his niece, he turned around in his seat and looked in their direction. Ash's smile grew wide and bright when his eyes met Cass's, and Cass's heart skipped a beat. Ash waved, and Bri squealed again, still bouncing and clapping.

Cass pursed his lips as his own smile grew, and he lifted a hand to wave back. Ash held his gaze for several more seconds before giving him a soft nod. Then he waved to Bri again, making her giggle hysterically, before turning back to the front to watch as the other graduates were called up.

The ceremony continued. After the PhD students, those graduating with master's degrees were called up. Finally, after another short speech, this time by an undergrad, Ash and the other bachelor's degree recipients stood and made their way to either side of the stage to get their pictures taken and await their turn for their names to be called.

Cass's chest swelled with pride as he watched his boyfriend follow the other students up and around to the right side of the stage. It felt like so much bigger of a moment than what it was given, knowing everything Ash had been through to get here. He swallowed back a bunch of overwhelming emotions, most of them good this time, as Ash made his way up the steps and handed a small paper to the announcer.

"Asher Thomas Finnley," came the voice through the loudspeaker.

Joanna and Henry cheered, as did some others in the crowd, and Cass blinked away tears and joined in, holding Bri tight as she squirmed around and clapped along with everyone else. Ash glanced toward them as he walked across the stage.

"Un-ca! Un-ca! Yay yay yay!"

Ash must have heard Bri, because his grin became even bigger. He lifted both hands and formed a heart, and Bri squealed again. Ash laughed and shook his head, his eyes so bright and happy. It was a beautiful moment.

He paused right in the middle of the stage, where a ramp led back down to the student seating, turned, and grinned again, lifting up his hand to wave at them. From next to Cass, Joanna had pulled out her phone, and she said something like, "Oh, I wish Rose and Tom were here to see this."

"Un-ca Ash, Cass! See! See!" Bri pointed again.

There was a tug in Cass's chest as he nodded, tightening his arm around Bri. "I see him, sweet girl. He did it, huh?"

"He did it!" she repeated, clapping. "He did it, he did!"

The ceremony continued only for another twenty minutes or so and concluded with short closing remarks by the dean of the College of Education. Then, it was over.

Cass stood along with Joanna and Henry and shifted Bri to his hip as he picked up his duffle bag. They made their way outside, along with the rest of the crowd, exiting through a different set of doors than Cass had come in. They ended up in a small courtyard, and Joanna led them over to a circular garden filled with colorful rose bushes in full bloom, where they'd planned to meet up with Ash after the ceremony.

Not more than a couple of minutes later, Bri started squirming.

"Un-ca Ash! Un-ca Ash!"

Cass followed Bri's gaze to see Ash squeezing his way through the crowd ahead of them. When their eyes locked, Ash's grin grew even wider, and he broke into a jog to close the rest of the distance between them. Then, without any hesitation at all, he was in Cass's arms, his warm, soft lips pressing into Cass's. The kiss was both reassuring and comforting, easing some of the tension Cass still held, and they kissed again and then one more time. Then, with a laugh, Ash pulled back, still smiling.

"I'm so, so happy to see you," he said. Before Cass could respond, Ash kissed him again, then leaned over and kissed Bri's cheek. He lifted her off Cass's hip and twirled her around. "My sweet girl, I missed you. Did you have fun with Cass and Joanna and Henry?"

"Yes! Yay yay yay, Un-ca Ash!" Bri wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight.

Ash spent another few seconds hugging her, then stepped over to Joanna and Henry and gave them both hugs that lingered longer than they maybe normally would. When he straightened up again, he looked back at Cass and shook his head lightly.

Cass just smiled, ignoring the sinking feeling that had returned to the pit of his stomach—the one he'd had off and on for most of the day and for a lot of the whole last week, actually. It didn't make any sense, after all, because he knew it wasn't entirely related to the travel delays he'd had or to being late and all the stress that came with that, and it was warring with other, conflicting feelings that *did* make sense—like the elation of finally being back with Ash, where he knew he belonged, and that deep, strong sense of pride to see all Ash had accomplished. It ached, though, that

feeling, like a knot tightening low in his gut, whispering at him all the things that were wrong and would always be wrong. And it almost hurt.

Still, he forced a smile through it and reached out to take Ash's hand, and the feeling passed as soon as their fingers intertwined. Ash lifted Cass's hand and kissed his knuckles. Then, he grinned again and turned back to Joanna.

"So, dinner?" he asked, and they all started walking together in the direction Cass assumed must be toward the parking garage as Joanna, Henry, and Ash discussed where they'd go out to eat, Bri bouncing happily on Ash's hip.



HOURS LATER, AFTER DINNER at an amazing Italian restaurant, parting ways with the Wallers, and running through a bit of an abbreviated bedtime routine with a sleepy, grumpy toddler, Cass found himself alone for the first time since he'd arrived. Ash had disappeared into the bathroom to take a shower, leaving Cass in the living room, lying on the couch.

He was exhausted. And not from traveling. It was some deep, heavy exhaustion that he'd been feeling for a while but hadn't ever let himself acknowledge.

Years of being *on* every day, helping to care for his mom.

Years of hiding how draining it was.

Years of ignoring all of his worry and anxiety.

And now the added stress of months of juggling all of that with school and a relationship. A relationship that was extremely important to him.

He'd always told himself (and everyone else) that he didn't mind, and that wasn't untrue. He loved his parents very much, and caring for his mom was the best way he knew to show them that. But he'd also be lying if he said he wasn't struggling right now as life was pulling him in two directions.

He wanted to be *here*, with Ash and Bri and all the joy they brought him, but he *needed* to be there.

Even leaving for only one day, *knowing* he'd be back home tomorrow night, had him on edge, his stomach a knot of worry and anxiety. All the stress of the day's traveling—with delays and more delays and traffic and

uncertainty—hadn't helped much, and he wished he could attribute all he was feeling right now to that.

It was more than that, though.

His mom had been hospitalized again not more than a month ago, and while it had ended up not being too serious, he still felt rattled from it. And now, knowing he was six hundred miles away, it was difficult to *not* worry, to let himself enjoy his time here with Ash and Bri. He couldn't seem to rid himself of the on-and-off feeling of being almost sick to his stomach or the mild headache pulsing behind his eyes.

His dad had texted hours ago to say good night. His mom had had a fine day and afternoon. And Cass would be home tomorrow. They were planning to leave here pretty early. It was a long drive, but it would get him home to Redding around the same time as if he flew, and since Ash was driving down anyway, it made much more financial sense for Cass to tag along in the car.

Everything was fine anyway. His mom was okay now, and his dad was staying home from work to be there with her. Cass would see them both tomorrow afternoon.

So his anxiety made no sense, right? Unless there was something else to it . . . like maybe whatever was behind the nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach, telling him something was wrong.

He didn't like it one bit, especially since it had been getting worse over the last few months . . . and *a lot* worse in the last few weeks, if he let himself admit it.

Which he didn't like to do.

A sound from down the hallway jolted him out of his introspection, and Cass sat up, biting back a groan as his shoulders tightened. The shower was off, but the bathroom door was still closed. He heard the sound again—a quiet cry—coming from the bedroom.

*Bri.*

Quickly, he jumped up off the couch, jogged to the bedroom, and slowly pushed the door open. Bri was standing in her crib, grasping the railing, her eyes red and tears slipping down her cheeks. She let out another cry and pointed to the floor, where her octopus stuffie sat.

"Oh, no, did Ollie fall?" Cass said softly, stepping into the room.

Bri sniffled and nodded silently, still grasping the crib's railing.

Cass headed to the crib and gently lifted Bri out, settling her on his hip. Then, holding her close, he leaned over and picked up the octopus. She quickly took it from him, wrapped the stuffie up in a tight hug, and closed her eyes as she rested her head on Cass's shoulder.

With a small smile, Cass closed his eyes, too, rocking Bri in his arms. He started humming quietly, the first song that came to his mind—"You Are My Sunshine," which his mom used to sing to him when he was little. By the time he'd gotten through the first verse, she was fast asleep against him, her eyes closed and her breathing deep and slow.

He dropped a light kiss on top of her head and then carefully lowered her back into the crib, settled Ollie next to her, and covered her with her blanket. He stood there watching her sleep for a few seconds, his heart stuttering in his chest.

He loved her, too. He loved her, and he loved Ash. And he loved being here with them.

And for some reason, that thought, which should have been a perfectly joyful thought, brought another wave of anxiety with it.

From behind him, he heard a light knock, and when he turned around, Ash was standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe, watching Cass with a soft expression. Cass smiled weakly, glanced back at Bri to make sure she was still sleeping, and then slowly made his way across the room. Ash pushed himself away from the doorframe to meet him, and his hands slipped up Cass's chest.

With a smile and a small shake of his head, Ash leaned in and brushed his lips against Cass's. "How are you so perfect?" he whispered, and he kissed Cass again. It was warm and soft and seemed to ease Cass's anxiety, soothing the ache in his heart.

So he leaned into that feeling more, slipping his arms around his boyfriend and pulling him close for another deep kiss. It helped, maybe, and with a little more effort, he managed to push away all of his uncertainty and all of his worry, letting his boyfriend's kisses comfort him.

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*Shaina (Tuesday, June 6, 2023 – 9:44 p.m.):* Soooooooo proud of you! Wish I could have been there. Love you so much <3

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# Chapter Forty-Nine

## *Ash*

WARMTH HAD FILLED ASH'S chest the moment he'd seen Cass cradling Bri so gently, humming softly to lull her back to sleep. It was some deep, deep warmth that tugged at his heart and seemed to reinforce every joyful thought he'd had about the direction their relationship was going.

He was so in love. He wanted to tell Cass that, to show him. And he wanted to talk about the future—*their* future, together.

He knew things were difficult now. They lived so far apart and were busy all the time with school and other responsibilities. Cass's parents needed him, and Bri often required all of Ash's attention. Also, although Ash had come far, he still fought constantly against the heavy despair that could sometimes blanket his thoughts. He missed his sister; he knew he always would. And at times, it still seemed wrong that he could "move on" and be happy—really, truly happy—even though she was gone. But he couldn't stop himself from jumping into the future—sometime, maybe years from now, when they could be living together, sharing their whole lives with each other, rather than relying on stolen moments between the long stretches of separation.

There was nothing he wanted more, and he wanted to make sure Cass knew that.

He knocked lightly on the door, and Cass turned around, his eyes as soft and gentle as his voice had been when he'd been humming to Bri. That warmth in Ash's chest deepened into a heat that spread all the way down

into his toes. Cass glanced back at Bri one more time, as though checking to see if she were still asleep, then he made his way silently across the room. Ash's hands slipped up to tease at the back of Cass's neck, and he couldn't wait. He shook his head, stretched up, and kissed his boyfriend.

"How are you so perfect?" he whispered, his lips still close to Cass's.

Cass didn't say anything, but he smiled against Ash's mouth, and that sent another rush of heat through him. Cass's arms wrapped around Ash's waist, bringing them closer together. Then they kissed again, slowly and deeply, as Ash backed them up out of the bedroom, down the hallway, and into the living room.

As soon as they reached the corner at the end of the hallway, Cass's arms tightened around him, and Cass groaned, turning them to push Ash back against the closet door in the apartment's small entryway. One of Cass's hands settled on the middle of Ash's chest, pressing into him as their kiss momentarily deepened, Cass's tongue sweeping into his mouth. A low whimper rumbled in Ash's throat, and he joyfully reciprocated. Cass tasted faintly of chocolate and wine, a combination Ash found intoxicating and arousing as hell. With a low groan, Ash let his hands slip down Cass's chest and then around to his lower back, and just as he was about to press their hips together—to show his boyfriend what this was doing to him—Cass broke their kiss and dropped down to his knees, hooking his fingers into the waistband of Ash's sweats.

"Can I—"

Ash nodded eagerly, and Cass wasted no time at all, tugging Ash's sweats and briefs down to his knees in one quick motion. Wet heat enveloped Ash's hardening cock, and a rough moan escaped his lips. He screwed his eyes shut and pressed his head back against the closet door, letting his fingers thread into Cass's hair. His boyfriend seemed to like the encouragement. He took Ash's erection all the way to the back of his throat, doing things with his tongue that sent jolts of heat and pleasure shooting through Ash. Then he slid back up the length of Ash's cock and did it again and again, the pace intense, without any hesitation at all.

Words slipped out, quiet curses mixed with half-formed moans of Cass's name, as he seemed to be rushing toward that wonderful edge he'd only started to get to know. Vaguely, as his body began to tingle with his impending climax, he remembered that he'd had other plans for the night—

a continuation of some exploration they'd had on their recent video calls. He groaned at the thought and willed his body to hold off.

"Cass," he mumbled. "Cass, ahh, I—god, fuck."

Cass did something different this time as he came up, Ash wasn't even sure what. Something with his tongue playing along the underside of Ash's cock and then swirling it around the tip. It was almost too much. After another slew of weak curses, his knees nearly giving out, Ash groaned again, lowered his hands to Cass's shoulders, and gently pushed him back.

"Wait," he managed, his voice trembling and hoarse. "Wait, I wanted to —" He sucked in a breath as his dick slipped out of Cass's mouth, and when he glanced down, he saw Cass looking up at him while planting slow kisses along his upper thigh. His heart stuttered, and he forced a deep breath.

Cass's hand caressed up his leg and then wrapped around his shaft and stroked him lazily. "What did you want to do?" Cass asked between kisses, still holding Ash's gaze.

Ash groaned and tilted his head back against the closet door again. Part of him just wanted to shake his head and forget about it, let Cass finish what he'd started. But then he had a flash of a memory from their video call on his birthday a few weeks ago, the intense neediness in Cass's groans as Ash had given him a show, teasing him as he pleasured himself with a sex toy—a toy that was hiding up in a box on the top shelf of the closet just behind him. And one that Cass had specifically said he couldn't wait to help Ash use *in person*.

Although he'd referred to the toy as a birthday gift, he'd had it for several years now—a simple, light-blue silicone dildo, not too long or too thick. Before Bri had come into his life, he'd only used the toy a handful of times, barely enough to begin to explore that part of his sexuality, and as soon as Bri had started crawling, he'd had the sense to move it from the drawer in his nightstand to the top of the closet, far, far out of her reach. For his birthday last month, he'd taken it out for the first time since hiding it away, and he hadn't been disappointed.

Neither had Cass.

"I wanted to—" He grunted something that was probably quite incoherent as Cass shifted to kiss the base of his shaft. A throb of want shuddered through him, and he squeezed Cass's shoulder and tried to

continue with a clearer voice. “I wanted to show you more of what we can do with that birthday gift.”

Predictably, that got Cass’s attention. Still stroking Ash’s dick slowly, Cass pushed himself back up to stand, his free hand settling on Ash’s hip. With a teasing smile, Ash tipped his head back, motioning to the closet.

“You interested?” he asked, letting both hands smooth under Cass’s shirt and up his chest. He already *knew* Cass was interested—he could see the intense curiosity and arousal in Cass’s eyes—but he teased him again anyway, letting his fingertips graze lightly over Cass’s nipples before flattening his palms and rubbing back down. Cass sucked in a breath and closed his eyes, and Ash grinned. He wet his lips with his tongue, then leaned in and kissed that one sensitive spot on Cass’s neck that he knew would get him even more of a reaction.

Just as Ash expected, Cass groaned, a deep rumble in his throat that Ash could feel against his lips. It was arousing as hell, and Ash kissed him again in the same spot before pushing him back gently.

“That’s a yes, then?”

Cass’s eyes darkened with want as he nodded. His heart racing with anticipation, Ash leaned back in to kiss Cass on the lips this time, and when their mouths met, Cass’s hand slipped around under his shirt and to his lower back, towing their hips together. Through the soft, thin material of Cass’s blue-and-gray plaid pajama pants, Ash could feel how aroused Cass was.

*God.*

He wasn’t sure exactly what they were going to do tonight, how far they might let things go, but he was suddenly looking forward to the upcoming week at Cass’s house even more than he already had been.

With considerable effort, Ash pulled back again, his breathing now fast and ragged. Giving Cass a knowing half smile, he dropped his hands, tugged up his pants, and then turned around and reached for the closet’s door handle.

He stretched up to grab the nondescript black box from the top shelf, and when he turned back to his boyfriend, Cass’s hungry eyes were trained on it. Ash smiled and bit his lower lip as he shut the closet door quietly.

He watched as Cass swallowed hard, then dragged his eyes up to Ash’s. Cass shook his head almost imperceptibly, though Ash wasn’t sure exactly what that meant.

“You’re going to . . . do what with it, exactly?” Cass asked, his voice thick and rougher than normal. “Describe it to me, please.”

His heart thrumming in his chest, Ash smirked and stepped up closer to Cass, reaching out to take Cass’s hand in his. He led Cass over to the couch, and when Cass sat, Ash straddled his thighs, settling comfortably on top of him. He set the box down next to them and leaned in to kiss Cass deeply. Their mouths danced together, their tongues tangled and tasting and insistent, though the kiss remained gentle too. When Ash broke away a moment later, he was breathing hard again. He tipped his forehead to rest against Cass’s.

“So, what I want to do,” he started, his voice soft, “is show you what I like, how I like it. I’ll use my fingers first and then the toy, like I did on our video call on my birthday. And then”—he brushed his lips against Cass’s cheek and lowered his voice more—“I want you to use it on me.”

He didn’t mention all the other things he wanted to do with Cass. Later in the week, though, they could talk more about it. *Do* more about it.

His stomach swooped at the thought of Cass’s hot shaft pressing into his hole, Cass holding his hips to steady him, then thrusting into him—carefully at first, of course Cass would be careful and gentle, but then harder and faster. Not rough, but confident.

The same thoughts seemed to be flitting through Cass’s mind. His eyes darkened more, and he swallowed again with a slow nod, his hands rubbing gently along Ash’s lower back under his shirt.

“That, uh, that sounds really good,” Cass said, his words catching in his throat.

Ash grinned and nodded in agreement. Then he sat back on Cass’s thighs and opened the box. Inside was the dildo, wrapped in a small cloth bag, a bottle of lube, and a clean hand towel. He took the lube and towel out first, set them on the couch, and then reached for the toy. “You haven’t ever __”

“No,” Cass cut in, and he lifted up his eyes to meet Ash’s. His cheeks were bright red, maybe with embarrassment, and Ash had the fleeting thought that it was adorable. And that Cass was gorgeous. And that this was going to be really, *really* good.

“I got this a while ago,” Ash explained. “Just after high school, actually. I wasn’t ready to come out yet and start dating or anything, but I . . . well . . .” He shrugged and grinned again.

Cass’s fingers flexed into his waist, as though anticipating what was to come, and a new bolt of heat and arousal coursed through Ash. He took the toy out of the bag, set the box down on the coffee table behind him, then settled back on Cass’s thighs. Gripping the smooth silicone lightly at the wide base, he lifted his eyes back to his boyfriend, and his pulse kicked up another notch. Cass had his bottom lip in his teeth, and his chest rose and fell rapidly as his breathing became shorter and rougher.

Ash’s cock stirred at the sight.

He pushed back a bit more and then stood, slipping off Cass’s lap. He didn’t want to go far, so he just inched the coffee table back a bit with his foot to give himself enough room. Then, smirking, he reached out and offered the silicone toy to Cass.

“Hold this for me?”

Cass’s eyebrows arched, and his face reddened even more as he took the toy. He seemed to study it for a few seconds, brushing his fingers up the underside to the fake cockhead. Then he bit his lower lip again and glanced back at Ash. “It’s, uh, smoother than I expected,” Cass said, though as soon as the words were out, he seemed to regret them. He grimaced. “Sorry, I feel awkward because I’ve never, uh . . .”

“You’re not uncomfortable with it, are you?” Ash asked quickly, adding, “If you are, we don’t have to do this. We can do whatever without it.”

Cass immediately shook his head. “No, no. Please keep going. Show me what you like. I want . . . I want to know.”

“Okay.”

With a playful smile, Ash stepped back just enough that he was not quite out of Cass’s reach. Then he undressed, taking his time. His shirt came off first, and he closed his eyes as he let his hand caress up and down his chest, over his taut nipples, down to the thin trail of hair disappearing under the hem of his sweats. He imagined Cass’s hands touching him, as they had been only moments ago, and a low whimper escaped him, his dick throbbing with arousal. He turned so his back was to his boyfriend, then he slipped both hands down his sides and under his waistband of his sweats, pushing them off. He heard a soft curse from Cass, and he straightened and glanced back over his shoulder. Cass’s tongue peeked out of his lips, and he stared intently at Ash’s backside, breathing hard already, the bulge in his pants clear evidence of his arousal.

Ash paused to take it in and prepare himself for what he was about to do, his heart hammering in his chest.

The only time they'd done anything similar to this—that one time over a video call last month on Ash's birthday—he'd been nervous, though he'd tried his best to act confident and coy. He'd been worried Cass wouldn't be interested or that it would make him uncomfortable, or even that he might be offended by Ash wanting to use the sex toy. But, like with everything else they'd done together, Cass had been all in and seemed just as aroused by watching as Ash was by "performing."

Now was no exception.

Cass lifted his eyes slowly as though taking in all of Ash's body. "Gorgeous," he breathed.

Their eyes met, and Ash nearly melted under the pure adoration in Cass's expression. He exhaled and closed his eyes as he started touching himself again, one hand wrapping around his hard shaft, the other stroking down between his ass cheeks. It *was* different, touching himself like this with Cass right there. But it was different in a good way, especially when he heard the couch creak quietly and then felt Cass's fingers trail gently up the outside of his thigh.

He moaned softly and then breathed out again. "Can you hand me the lube?"

"Mm-hmm."

Rather than give Ash the bottle, Cass popped open the lid and squeezed a small amount onto Ash's fingers. Then he closed the bottle and returned his hand to Ash's leg.

"Mmm, thank you," Ash hummed. He spread his legs just slightly, arched his back, and slipped his fingers down between his cheeks again to circle the outside of his hole. Cass's hand continued its path up and down the outside of Ash's thigh, searing his skin. That heightened *everything*, and he gasped as the teasing touch with his own fingers sent a strong, hot pulse through him. Now slick and warm and very, very ready, he arched a little more, reached back with his other hand to spread his cheeks, and slowly pushed one finger in.

It occurred to him that maybe he should be narrating, telling Cass exactly what he was doing and why—how the foreplay and touching and then this part, with his fingers, helped relax his muscles and stretch him out so using the toy would be easier and more pleasurable. But with Cass being

so close, right there, watching and hearing all the little sounds Ash was making, he was pretty sure Cass understood.

He moaned again as his finger breached the outer ring of muscle, and just as he started to work it in deeper, Cass's lips grazed the skin over his hip.

"You want to get more comfortable? Kneel on the couch, maybe?" Cass asked quietly, and he kissed Ash's hip more deliberately this time.

"Mmm, yeah, okay," Ash agreed, letting his finger slip out of his hole.

He turned around, and Cass eagerly guided him to the couch, shifting to give Ash plenty of room. Ash positioned himself so he was facing the back of the couch, kneeling on the middle seat cushion. Then Cass helped him with more lube and sat silently, caressing the back of Ash's thigh, as Ash spread his knees and pushed a finger in again, deeper this time. He groaned and tilted his head toward his boyfriend.

"Better?" Cass said softly, letting his hand drift higher up Ash's thigh and to his hip.

Ash closed his eyes with a small nod. "Very."

He smiled to himself as he heard Cass exhale a sharp breath. Then he slowly pulled his finger out and pushed it in again, not even trying to keep himself quiet, either. With a low moan, he arched his back more and continued working his finger in and out of his hole, stretching and prepping himself.

When he added a second finger, Cass's palm pressed into his back.

"Jesus, Ash." There was a pause, and then Cass asked, "It feels good?"

"Yes," Ash answered simply, opening his eyes partway.

Cass tore his gaze away from Ash's backside and shook his head lightly. "You're gorgeous like this," he said. "I hope you know what you're doing to me."

His words sent another of those sharp jolts of arousal through Ash, and he closed his eyes again. "Kiss me," he said on a rough breath, and almost immediately, Cass's lips were on his, devouring him. The kiss deepened, their tongues teasing and tasting. Somehow Cass shifted both of them so Ash was straddling him again, one knee on either side of Cass's thighs. Then both of Cass's hands cupped Ash's ass, kneading into him insistently. Ash broke away, setting one hand on the back of the couch and then arching as he pushed up. His fingers slipped out of his hole, and he groaned.

"Are you ready?" Cass asked, and Ash nodded.

This wasn’t exactly how he’d pictured things going, but he was *more* than ready. His cock throbbed, leaking precum, and he knew that as soon as Cass touched him, he’d be gone.

He opened his eyes and watched as Cass drizzled lube over the silicone, no longer looking at all uncomfortable or awkward holding it. Leaning in, Ash trailed his lips along Cass’s jawline, planting tiny kisses as he went.

When he reached just under Cass’s ear, he hummed softly and then whispered, “Will *you* do it?” He flattened his palm along Cass’s inner thigh and then stroked Cass’s hard shaft through the thin material of his pajama pants.

Cass whined a response that Ash interpreted as an enthusiastic *yes*. Holding himself steady with one hand on the back of the couch, Ash helped Cass spread the lube over the toy, stroking the fake cock from base to tip. Then he reached over and picked up the bottle of lube.

“It needs a little more,” he explained, popping the top. He squeezed more lube onto the toy and his fingers, slicked up the outside of his hole, and then closed the bottle and wiped his hand on the towel.

Cass looked eager but also a tad nervous, and so Ash bent his head and met Cass’s lips in a light, affirming kiss. Then he pulled back, his hand finding Cass’s erection again, and he tipped his forehead to rest against Cass’s as he whispered, “Please, Cass.”

That seemed to be enough. Cass shifted slightly, rubbing his free hand up Ash’s back and then down to his ass cheek. Ash helped him, arching to better expose his hole, then taking the head of the toy and guiding it to his entrance. As soon as it started to press into him, his body lit up, want and need and arousal flaring through him.

“Right there,” he panted. “Now slowly in.”

Cass leaned forward, his lips brushing along Ash’s shoulder, and with a quiet groan that he seemed to try to muffle against Ash’s skin, he did as Ash instructed, slowly pushing the toy into Ash’s eager hole.

Ash had done this before—alone, of course. Yet it somehow felt completely different when he wasn’t the one controlling the toy. And though he was prepped and very ready, the moment the head breached his hole, he sucked in a breath, dropping his head to Cass’s shoulder.

“Oh, fuck,” he mumbled. Cass hesitated, and Ash immediately shook his head and pushed back against the toy. “Sorry. It’s so good. Please, please don’t stop,” he begged. “Keeping going.”

Placing another soft kiss on Ash's shoulder, Cass continued, inching the dildo in carefully. Ash groaned and panted and moaned, his body buzzing and his cock begging for attention. God, it felt incredible. He turned his head and touched his lips to Cass's neck.

"Now . . . now you can—" Ash cut himself off with what might have been a whine, and then he buried his head in the crook of Cass's shoulder and rocked himself forward and then back again as Cass slowly pulled the toy out and pushed it back in. "Fuck, yeah, yeah, like that," he breathed, his voice shaky and rough.

Cass was quiet, but Ash could feel his boyfriend's heart pounding, the slightly-too-fast puffs of air on his shoulder, the insistent kneading of Cass's fingers into his ass cheek.

His boyfriend was just as on the edge as he was. And he loved that.

The dildo slid in and out of Ash's channel easily now, the pace perfect. He shifted to arch back more and muffled a cry as pleasure shot through him.

"Right there?" Cass said against him, and all Ash could do was nod as the heat and intensity built until he felt like he was full of some blinding light about to burst. His entire body, all the way down into his toes, burned with the sensation. Through the haze, he slipped his free hand down and wrapped his fingers around Cass's hard length.

When had Cass pushed his pants down?

The thought had barely formed when Cass groaned. "Ah, god, Ash—you barely touched me, and I'm so close. Ahh, fuck. Are you—"

Before Cass could finish his question, a ripple rushed through Ash, bold and white-hot and full. He screwed his eyes shut and pressed his head into Cass's shoulder as a deep sound tore from his throat, his body pulsing with pleasure. The waves kept going for what had to be several long seconds and then slowly ebbed into a dull, sated haze of contentment.

His arms shook and his legs trembled, and Cass was breathing heavily against him, one arm now wrapped around Ash's back. A warm, thick wetness covered Ash's fist.

*Cass had come at the same time.*

Something about that made Ash's stomach swoop, and he smiled through shallow breaths as a tear escaped from the corner of his eye. Quietly, he lifted his chin so he could kiss Cass's temple, and then he tilted his head to rest against his boyfriend's.

There was so much he wanted to say. And yet, he knew all the words in the world wouldn't be enough.

"Amazing," Cass murmured. Lips pressed lazily against Ash's neck, and another tear slipped out and down his cheek.

He exhaled a shuddering breath and nodded. "Mm-hmm."

After another moment, Cass shifted carefully, brushed another kiss on Ash's neck, and said, softly, "Let me go get a towel to clean you up."

Ash mumbled some sort of agreement, but he was still in so much of a daze that he didn't even realize Cass had left and come back until a pair of strong hands helped him lie back on the couch. Kisses fluttered on his forehead and cheeks and lips while Cass gently cleaned him. A blanket draped over him, and Ash smiled and turned onto his side, curling up comfortably on the couch cushions. He half opened his eyes, watching sleepily as Cass, now dressed in a new T-shirt and a clean pair of Ash's sweats, picked up the toy and the lube and the box and then disappeared again.

When Cass returned another few minutes later, he joined Ash on the couch. They kissed and cuddled, Ash still naked but wrapped up in the blanket. Everything was so perfect and so right—exactly how he'd wanted it to be—and he couldn't help smiling against Cass's mouth as they kissed again.

*I love you*, he wanted to say. There was not a single doubt in his mind that it was true and real.

This week. He'd tell Cass this week, he decided. Some moment when they were together and alone but that wasn't clouded in this wonderful, blissful post-orgasm haze.

He smiled again at the thought, and Cass pulled back enough that Ash could see the question and curiosity in his eyes. He shook his head. "I'm glad you're here. That's all."

Some rush of emotions flickered across Cass's face, too fast for Ash to catch them all. Then Cass's expression softened, and he leaned back in and kissed Ash one more time.

"I am too," he said. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be right now."

With a happy sigh, Ash buried his head in Cass's chest and closed his eyes as Cass's arms tightened around him.

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*Joe (Wednesday, June 7, 2023 – 12:05 p.m.):* Are you still available Saturday? Shouldn't be more than a few hours to get everything loaded up in the U-Haul. I think Matty and Tam are coming to help too, and there will be pizza!

*Joe (12:06 p.m.):* If not, no worries

*Joe (12:06 p.m.):* But it would be great to see you again before I leave. My sister wants us to be on the road early Sunday morning

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# Chapter Fifty

## Cass

THE HOURS-LONG DRIVE FROM Seattle to Redding was filled with all sorts of moments: quiet ones, like when Bri was snoozing in her car seat; silly ones, like when Ash started an out-of-key sing-along to one of Bri's favorite tunes and when Bri decided to tell them a story that started with "Once on a time!"; and joyful ones, like when Bri laughed so happy and free and when Ash smiled that huge, wide grin of his that lit up Cass's whole heart.

All of those moments were mostly enough to drown out the negative threads trying to weave into Cass's thoughts. Sort of.

Flickers still managed to sneak through. Especially when his phone buzzed with a message from his dad a little while after they crossed over the border into California, high up in the Siskiyous.

*Almost home? Your mom misses you <3*

And again a little while later, when Ash reached over and took his hand, then lifted it to kiss his knuckles, though why that moment carried hurt with it, Cass wasn't really sure.

Maybe it was the reminder of the future he wanted so, so badly but just couldn't get himself to see, even with how much he'd been trying.

They should talk about it, he knew. He'd reasoned it out in his head already, and that would be the smart, sensible thing to do—talk about it. But whenever he thought maybe he'd gathered enough courage to try, something stopped him. Ash's smile or Bri's laugh. Or that feeling of love

and joy and acceptance that washed over him every time Ash squeezed hand.

He quickly realized how terrified he was to do anything that might jeopardize what they had.

So he'd pushed down the pain and uncertainty again, like he had the night before, and he'd tried to stay in the present instead. He'd smiled back. He'd laughed along with them. And when there was quiet, he'd forced his mind to go elsewhere—admiring the beautiful views outside as they drove through the towering mountains of southern Oregon and Northern California, reveling in the soft comfort of Ash's thumb rubbing gently back and forth across his skin.

The drive itself was long but not bad, and Ash handled it better than either of them had expected. The last time Ash had made this specific drive had been immediately after news of his sister's death, and so, they'd planned to switch off driving if it became too much or if Ash needed a break. He'd been okay enough, however. At one point, when Bri was napping, he'd talked quietly about the whole ordeal, recalling the pain, the exhaustion, the frantic energy accompanying a *need* to get down to California as quickly as possible to be there for Bri. He'd even admitted to listening to a voicemail from his sister on replay during the drive—a voicemail he said he still had saved on his phone. He was scared to delete it, scared to lose her voice, and he thought maybe one day he might share it with Bri, when he told her all about her mom and what an incredible woman she'd been.

The strength Ash showed only made Cass fall in love with him all over again. And made him feel even more like a coward.

By the time they pulled up along the curb outside Cass's home, it was late afternoon, the sun still high up in the sky and the heat baking the inside of the car as soon as the engine cut. Bri whined from the back seat, probably grumpy and tired and in need of a diaper change, and so they wasted no time gathering her and their things to head inside.

Cool air met him as Cass opened the door, and familiar laughter traveled their way from what sounded like the kitchen. Something in Cass's chest loosened, like there'd been a tension growing he hadn't been aware of, and he breathed a sigh of relief and held the door open as Ash shuttled Bri inside.

“Mom, Dad, we’re home!” Cass called out, and in an instant, Bri copied him.

“We home, we home! Cass home!” she called, her grumpiness apparently forgotten. She squirmed around in Ash’s arms, wanting to be set down.

Ash laughed quietly. “Hang on, sweet girl, hang on. No running around, okay? You have to stay with me and Cass.”

Bri seemed about to protest, her face scrunching up. But then Cass’s parents came through the entryway leading into the kitchen, and instead, Bri squealed with delight and threw her arms out in greeting.

“Hi! We here! Cass home!”

The scene unfolded in front of Cass like a perfect fairy-tale reunion. Ash carefully set Bri down, and she bounded over to where Cass’s mom sat in her wheelchair. His dad stepped around to lift Bri up, gave her a hug, and placed her gently on his mom’s lap. There were more hugs, more greetings, and Bri jabbered on and on about this and that, her huge smile matched by the look of pure joy and adoration on Cass’s mom’s face. Ash set down the diaper bag and then stepped forward to greet Cass’s parents.

But Cass stood there, frozen, his feet glued to the floor. His heart simultaneously burst with love for everyone in the room—his parents, his boyfriend, the beautiful, innocent child he’d come to care for so much—and ached with an intense longing for this to be *his*, every day. A dread settled over him. It was, after all, impossible, he’d realized. A future with all of this couldn’t exist. The heaviness of those thoughts weighed more than any burden he’d ever tried to carry, and he swallowed hard and shook his head, trying to dislodge it.

He was catastrophizing, turning a precious moment into something foreboding, and all because he hadn’t had the courage yet to *talk* to his boyfriend about what they would do *in the future*.

Even though he recognized the dissonance, the absurdity of the pessimistic *assumption* that good things could not happen for him, he couldn’t shake the unease. His chest tightened in a painful way, and he forced a slow breath and then another, pasting a fake smile on his face as his dad stepped over to him.

They shared words. A greeting. A quick update on how Mom had been doing the last day—she was still tolerating her new medication well, and

she’d enjoyed the outing they’d gone on this morning, when the weather had been cooler.

Everything was good. Everything was fine. It was *more* than fine, really.

Yet, as Cass finally convinced his feet to move so he could hug her and then get Ash’s and Bri’s stuff set up in the guest room down the hall, the pain in his chest persisted.

And he had no idea how to deal with it.



ALL THROUGHOUT DINNER—A HEARTY vegetarian recipe of black-bean stuffed peppers his parents had made together—Cass found himself clenching and unclenching his jaw, forcing a smile, and avoiding concerned looks from Ash. Cass offered to take care of the dishes so his parents could spend some time with Bri before she went to bed, and he hoped the mundaneness of the chore would help him find his footing and put his mind at ease.

It did the opposite, however. From out in the living room, he could hear Bri’s joyful chatter among the laughter and conversation. He heard Ash and his mom talking about Seattle and then about teaching as a profession, and everything should have felt even more right. It would have, actually, if not for the knot in his stomach continuing to tell him that *this*—this togetherness and full house, which was exactly what he’d always wanted—wouldn’t and couldn’t last.

He’d finally finished doing the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen when he heard his dad’s familiar footsteps behind him. He pasted the same smile on his face that he’d been wearing all night, and he glanced back over his shoulder with a tip of his chin.

“Just done here. Everything good?” he asked, hanging the dish towel over the faucet and then turning around.

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” his dad said. The older man stepped closer to the table and set his hands on the back of one of the chairs. “You’ve been in here quite a while.”

He gave his dad a solid nod. “Yeah, all good,” he lied, and he immediately hated himself for it. His face felt hot, and he looked down at the floor.

When had he *ever* lied to his dad?

There was a heavy silence, and then his dad cleared his throat. “Okay, just checking. Your mom’s about ready to get to bed.”

Cass nodded again, all the words his dad hadn’t said hanging in the air between them. He pushed himself away from the counter and followed his dad back out into the living room, pausing right in the entryway. His eyes fell on Ash, who sat cross-legged on the floor, Bri in his lap, his eyes bright and curious as he answered a question from Cass’s mom. Bri leaned over the table and picked up a puzzle piece, trying to fit it somewhere it obviously didn’t go. And Cass’s mom smiled so kindly and softly, her head with that slight tilt to it, her expression tired but happy.

And his stupid heart contradicted itself again, bursting with love and aching with longing at the same time.

Ash noticed him then, and when their eyes met, Ash’s smile widened. He lifted a hand and motioned Cass over. “Your mom was telling me about when she first started teaching.”

“Oh?” He made his feet move and took a seat on the floor next to Ash. Bri immediately crawled over into his lap and curled up against his chest. That didn’t help his heart any. He leaned down and brushed a kiss in her hair.

“Oh, my, I think someone’s tired,” his mom murmured.

Ash nodded. “It’s been a long day,” he said. “She was so good on the drive, but I think it’s almost her bedtime.”

“Just about mine, too, I’m afraid,” Cass’s mom said with another gentle smile. “But yes, to what we were talking about before—you’re going to do great. I can see it.” She paused, and Cass could see the flicker of love in her eyes. He swallowed hard and hugged his arms tight around Bri as his mom continued. “There are two things I always told new teachers to remember. First, burnout helps no one. Take your days off. Don’t check your email in the evenings and on the weekends. If you’re overworking yourself constantly, it’ll catch up to you, *especially* if you’re planning to teach . . . early elementary?”

“Yeah. Kinder, hopefully,” Ash replied.

Cass’s mom nodded. “That seems like a perfect fit.”

Ash glanced down, his cheeks turning red. “And the second thing?”

“Oh, right, yes. Well, the second is . . .” She hesitated, a thoughtful expression on her face. “Maybe this will sound overly optimistic, but it can

get very easy, particularly in that first and second year, to get overwhelmed by how much it all is, and"—she took a long, slow breath before continuing—"I think it's important to try to remember to have fun and find joy and progress in *each* child *every* day. To me, that was the joy of the job—seeing the children grow and learn. Every day isn't necessarily easy. But children *are* a joy, and so is learning, and I think bringing that belief into the classroom just . . . helps."

"Thank you so much," Ash said, and he seemed about to say something else when Bri mumbled his name, her face still pressed against Cass's chest. Ash shrugged and then reached over to take Bri out of Cass's arms. "Bedtime, huh, sweet girl?"

"Book," Bri insisted sleepily. "Read book."

"We will, we will," Ash assured her, and he dropped a light kiss on her head before pushing himself to his feet and then addressing Cass. "She needs a bath. Are the towels still in the cabinet over the toilet?"

"Yeah, yeah. Here, I'll help." Cass stood. "Just give me one minute?"

With a soft nod, Ash shifted Bri in his arms. Then he said good night to Cass's parents before disappearing down the hallway. Cass gave his dad a tight smile, shame heating up his cheeks again, and he knelt in front of his mom and took her hands to say good night.

But before he could speak, she hummed quietly. "Caspian, something's bothering you," she said.

He frowned and dropped his eyes to their hands. He wanted to shake his head, to deny it, to lie, like he had with his dad. But he said nothing, unable to make any words come. Her hands squeezed his with a little more strength than he expected.

"I know you worry about things. You're the same as your father."

Cass huffed a quiet laugh and shook his head, but he still couldn't look up. His mom continued.

"If something is bothering you, the best thing to do is talk about it."

"I know, ma, but—"

She squeezed his hands again. "Half the time, there's actually nothing to even worry about."

Cass heard his dad chuckle, and he finally managed to lift his eyes. His parents were both watching him knowingly, like they understood exactly what was going through his head, even though they couldn't possibly have guessed. He forced another small smile.

“I’m, uh, going to help Ash with Bri,” he said.

“I think that’s a good idea.” His mom let his hands go and then patted his arm with her good hand. “He’s a wonderful man. And Bri is such a beautiful, happy child.”

His heart stuttered, and he swallowed again and nodded. “Good night. Love you, ma.” He pushed himself up enough to kiss her on the forehead, then straightened all the way and turned to his dad. “You, too, Dad.”

His father’s gaze seemed to bore right into him, not with anger or disappointment, but with something that might have been concern. Or understanding.

Cass quickly looked away. “Uh, what time are you leaving for work tomorrow?”

“Seven. And there’s no appointments or anything to remember, not until Monday next week.”

With a nod, Cass glanced back up at his dad. As soon as their eyes met, he felt an overwhelming need to apologize. No more words came, however, and all he could do was fake another smile, nod, and say good night again.

As he headed down the hallway, his mom’s words played on repeat in his head.

*“If something is bothering you, the best thing to do is talk about it.”*

He knew that. He’d told himself that several times today. And over the last few days, too. In fact, he’d been telling himself that ever since the feelings had started to bother him.

He also knew she was right. The worst thing he could do right now would be to keep hiding all the thoughts in his head, especially since they seemed to be getting more destructive, blowing everything out of proportion. And because they involved another person. Another person who was at risk of being very, very hurt if Cass—

He stopped abruptly in the middle of the hallway, one hand pressing into his chest as he sucked in a breath. Pain radiated outward, like his heart was actually breaking.

Ahead of him, the bathroom door was shut, but he could just hear Ash’s soft voice, interrupted by a splash and then a sleepy yet happy giggle from Bri.

God, he didn’t want to lose them. He *couldn’t*.

But he also *couldn’t* leave his parents. They needed him. His dad had to work, and Cass *had* to be home to care for his mom. There was no other

option.

And there was another equally important piece, too—one he remembered seeing so clearly when he'd visited Ash in Seattle back in April: Ash *loved* where he lived. He felt close to his sister there, close to his parents and all the memories he had of them. So, Cass also knew now that he couldn't ask Ash to move to Redding. That would be selfish and unfair.

Given all of that, how could they talk—how could he tell Ash he loved him and wanted to spend the rest of his life with him, because that was *also* true—if he couldn't see a solution to their very real problem?

He screwed his eyes shut as the pain deepened. Behind him, he heard his parents talking, coming closer on the way to their bedroom. He quickly clenched his jaw and tried his best to stuff all of his emotions back down where they belonged. Then he managed to convince his feet to move again, shuttling him forward toward the bathroom to help Ash.

He didn't know what to do. All he knew was that he was hurting and that it didn't feel very good.

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*Grant (Wednesday, June 7, 2023 – 8:44 p.m.):* Yo, did you get ur school placement yet? Mei has a friend who just started teaching at a school on Mercer Island last year, and she loves it

*Grant (8:46 p.m.):* Also I just heard from Enzo from high school. He’s back in town, just graduated from U of Arizona and starting some internship thing at Boeing, asked about u

*Grant (8:48 p.m.):* When u get back from Cali, we should all get together. Aden and Jules should be back by then too. REUNION TIME!

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# Chapter Fifty-One

## Ash

". . . 'SO all is well,' said the cat. And that was that. The end."

Ash watched, smiling softly, as his boyfriend closed the book, set it on the floor, and then cradled the tired toddler in his arms as he stood. Cass rocked Bri gently, whispered a few words in her ear, and then stepped over to her portable crib and lowered her in.

Bri was asleep nearly as soon as her head hit the pillow, but Cass still took a moment to pull her little blanket up to her shoulders and scoot her precious octopus stuffie closer to her, in case she woke up in the middle of the night and wondered where Ollie was.

When Cass turned around, Ash's heart skipped a beat. His boyfriend's kind eyes gazed back at him, so filled with love. He smiled and reached out his hand, and Cass took it without hesitation and then pulled Ash up to his feet. Ash wanted to kiss him right there—he wanted to *more* than kiss him, if he were being honest with himself. But he held back, knowing he could be patient for a few more minutes so they didn't wake Bri.

"You're so good with her," Ash said quietly. Cass shook his head and dropped his eyes, his cheeks turning an adorable shade of pink. Ash squeezed Cass's hand. "Come on," he said. Silently, he led them toward the bedroom door, stooping to grab one of his luggage bags on the way.

"What's in—"

"Shh, I'll show you in a minute," Ash teased.

They continued out the room, leaving the door cracked open a few inches, and then down the hallway to Cass's bedroom. The house was quiet now, though it wasn't particularly late, and it felt almost like they were sneaking around in a way they shouldn't be.

Once they were inside the bedroom, Cass shut the door behind them while Ash moved over toward the bed. He set his luggage down on the floor just as Cass's arms looped around his waist from behind. Lips brushed along his neck, and Ash moaned and tilted his head slightly to give Cass better access.

"So, what's in the bag?" Cass asked between kisses.

Ash laughed lightly and shook his head. "Nothing, actually," he admitted. "Just my pajamas and toothbrush and stuff." Cass groaned as though in protest, and Ash laughed again as he turned around in Cass's arms. "Sorry to tease. I mean, I *did* bring the other stuff, too, but I figured maybe that'd be for later in the week. It's in my other bag."

He expected a joke from Cass, or a laugh, Cass's eyes lighting up with anticipation and amusement. Or maybe for Cass to spin around and take off back to the guest bedroom to get the other bag. Instead, Cass's face flickered with that same concerning look Ash had been noticing all afternoon and evening—a look of uncertainty, or maybe worry? Cass's arms tightened around him, but before he could ask if everything was okay, the look was gone.

Cass lowered his mouth back to Ash's neck and kissed that spot right at the base of Ash's throat that always made his heart race. "Are you sleeping in here with me tonight?" he asked. His lips traced another path up the side of Ash's neck.

It was a really, *really* good distraction.

And it almost worked.

Except when Ash closed his eyes and saw that flicker of uncertainty in his boyfriend's expression again.

He slid his hands up Cass's chest and applied a light pressure, pushing Cass back slightly. "Yeah. That's what I was thinking. I mean, if that's okay?"

Cass nodded. "I'd love that, of course."

Despite Cass's words, something still seemed not right, though Ash couldn't figure out exactly what it was. He frowned and reached up with one hand to brush his fingers along Cass's jawline, then he leaned in and

placed a slow kiss in the same spot, memorizing the tickle of Cass's stubble and the warmth of Cass's breath on his cheek. When he pulled back again, Cass was watching him, his small smile not quite . . . him.

"Um, I—" Ash shook his head, still frowning. "I . . . should take a quick shower, if that's okay? And then I'll get the baby monitor up, just in case?"

"Yeah, sounds good," Cass agreed. His hands dropped away from Ash's arms, and he took a step backward.

Ash stared at him for a long second, unsure of what to do. Everything suddenly felt awkward, like how it'd been in the very beginning of their relationship when he hadn't known what to do or how to act. He finally managed a tight smile and got himself to move, bending down to pick up his bag and then starting back toward the door. But just as he got there, he stopped, his hand on the door handle, and he frowned again.

"Um . . ."

With a deep exhale, he turned around. Cass was now sitting on the bed, staring at his hands, which twisted around anxiously in his lap. Ash's stomach sank, and he shook his head.

"Something's wrong," he said, finally forcing out the words. "What's wrong?"

Moments from the last couple of days began replaying in his head as he tried to narrow it down. But he couldn't pinpoint anything. Nothing bad had happened. Nothing that had seemed unusual or worrisome. They hadn't argued or disagreed on anything, even. But Cass's smile wasn't right.

Something *was* wrong.

Cass still stared at his hands, his jaw now tight, and seeing him like that sent another sharp pang through Ash's chest.

"Cass?"

He stepped closer, dropping his bag back on the floor, and he watched, his stomach in knots, as his boyfriend shut his eyes but then reached out with both hands in what seemed like a desperate plea. Without hesitation, he closed the distance between them and took Cass's hands in his. Cass tugged him even closer until he stood right between Cass's legs. Then he rested his head on Ash's stomach with a deep sigh, his arms wrapping around Ash's midsection. Ash could feel him trembling slightly.

Pursing his lips in concern, Ash ran his hands down Cass's back and made himself take slow breaths to stay grounded.

Whatever was bothering Cass, it had to be something real. Something real and heavy. But for the life of him, he had no idea what it might be. Their relationship felt strong, despite all the challenges they'd had, and Cass's mom seemed to be doing quite well. Ash knew Cass worried about her when he was away, but . . . but he was home now and had only been gone a day and a half.

He swallowed hard and bent down to kiss the top of Cass's head. "I-I'm sorry if I did something to upset you," Ash said slowly. He didn't really think he had; he didn't think that was it. But he didn't know what else to say or do.

Cass quickly shook his head. "No, no, you didn't do anything," he mumbled. "I've just been in my head a lot today. That's all. That's—" He inhaled sharply and tightened his arms around Ash as though the thought of letting him go was physically painful.

Ash hugged him back. "I don't know what that means," he said quietly. "In your head a lot, thinking about what?"

Cass didn't respond except to shake his head again, and that worried Ash even more.

It had to be something bad if Cass didn't even want to talk about it. Only, he also had no idea what could be so bad that Cass wouldn't feel comfortable sharing with him.

Unless—

He closed his eyes for a second, refusing to let the thought continue. Instead, he knelt down in front of his boyfriend and found Cass's hands again. He squeezed gently and waited until Cass lifted his eyes, finally letting Ash see him. The flicker of emotions he'd glimpsed earlier—ones he'd labeled as uncertainty and worry—were clear as day on Cass's face now, as was a deep pain.

Ash's frown deepened, and he let go of one of Cass's hands to cup his cheek. "We can talk about it, if you want. Do you . . . do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

But Cass dropped his chin and stared down at their clasped hands, his face pale and the muscle in his jaw twitching. "No, uh . . . no, I don't think I'm ready to, yet," he said, his voice wavering with each word.

"Okay." Ash ran his thumb gently along Cass's cheek. "Okay, that's fine. Um, whatever it is, though, I need you to know I'll be here for you,

just like you've always been there for me. You can tell me anything. Whenever you're ready. Okay?"

Cass screwed his eyes shut, almost like those words hurt him somehow.

"Cass?"

"Yeah, yeah." Cass nodded and then sniffled and reached up to rub his eyes. "Okay, um, yeah. Thank you. I'll—I'll let you know."

That certainly didn't do much to ease Ash's concern, but he really had no idea what else he could do right then. He pushed himself to his feet.

"I'll be back, just a few minutes. Okay?"

Cass swallowed and nodded, keeping his eyes down. Reluctantly, Ash started toward the door, leaning down to scoop up his bag again on the way.



HE SHOWERED, SHAVED, AND brushed his teeth, and then he set up the baby monitor while Cass took a few minutes of his own to clean up and get ready for bed. When Cass returned, Ash had just settled on the bed and opened up the book that had been sitting on the nightstand—some fantasy adventure story with dragons and elves on the cover.

Cass laughed as he shut the door, the sound music to Ash's ears.

"That book . . ." Cass shook his head. He tossed his dirty clothes in a laundry hamper in the corner of the room and then crawled up onto the bed next to Ash. "I've been trying to read it for weeks now. But I'm only on, I dunno, chapter three or something."

"Hard to get into?"

"No, no, not really. I just keep getting interrupted every time I start. So I haven't gotten very far." Cass took the book out of Ash's hands, set it back on the nightstand, and then scooted over, propping himself up on his elbows over Ash.

"Is that so? *Something* interrupts you? Every night?" Ash arched his eyebrows. "Who would be so selfish as to bother you and interrupt your reading time, *every night*?"

Cass grinned and lowered his mouth to Ash's. The kiss was gentle and sweet and reassuring all at once.

"I'm sorry about earlier," Cass said softly, and he pulled back so Ash could see his eyes. "I don't want you to think . . ." He blinked, and his smile

faded. He tried again. “I don’t want you to worry about me. I’m fine. Really. Everything just got overwhelming or something today, seeing you here again, and my mom, and Bri.”

Ash brought both hands up to frame Cass’s face, and he tugged Cass down to him for another of those sweet, gentle kisses. “I understand that,” he said when they parted. “Just know that if you need to talk—about anything at all—I’m here.”

A playful smile grew on Cass’s face, one that looked much, much more like what Ash was used to.

“I think talking might be the last thing I want to do right now,” Cass said. He dipped down and started fluttering tiny kisses on Ash’s cheek and then neck as he settled over Ash more, one leg slipping between Ash’s knees.

“Oh?” Ash closed his eyes and pressed his head back into Cass’s pillow with a quiet moan. His hands found the hem of Cass’s shirt, and he tugged it up. “What did you want to do instead?”

Cass brushed a light kiss on Ash’s lips. “Just let me love you,” he whispered.

The words surrounded Ash like a blanket, warm and soft, and he smiled.

“I can do that.”

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*Joe (Sunday, June 11, 2023 – 6:10 p.m.):* Just got here. My sister's place is nice! Quiet and right near Lake Sammamish, which she says has a running trail all the way around? Not sure, but I'll have to check it out

*Joe (6:11 p.m.):* Thank you again for your help yesterday. It was quick work with everyone pitching in

*Joe (6:12 p.m.):* Next time you're up here to visit your boyfriend, shoot me a text so we can hang out (also, ugh, he's so sweet, I see why you like him)

*Joe (6:12 p.m.):* Take care. ttyl :)

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# Chapter Fifty-Two

## Cass

THE WEEK FLEW BY much, much too fast for Cass's comfort. They hung out, spent time with Cass's mom, went on walks and short trips to the local playground or to Turtle Bay. They cooked together and read books to Bri together. And every night, they crawled into bed together and kissed and cuddled. They made love, too, playful and passionate, bringing each other to climax with their hands or mouths or with the sex toy Ash had stowed away, hidden deep in his big luggage bag. And one time, they even ventured beyond that, Ash coaxing Cass into coming inside him for the first time.

It was perfect, and Cass easily convinced himself everything was fine and good and that he was happy. Because he *was* happy. How could he not be, with everything wonderful he had right there in Redding?

Yet as Ash's departure on Thursday approached, that barrier of optimism he'd been building up started to crumble. The process was slow, but he swore he could feel every moment slipping farther away, the threads he'd stitched together starting to break one by one.

Wednesday night, his dad came home a little bit early from work to watch Bri, and Cass surprised Ash with a night out. They went to a nice restaurant for dinner, and then Cass drove them across town to take a walk over the Sundial Bridge just after the sun set, the bridge's colorful glowing lights making it seem almost magical.

They stayed out a bit later than Cass had planned, and when they got home, the house was quiet. Bri had gone to sleep hours ago, as had Cass's

mom and dad.

That suited Cass just fine.

He threaded his fingers through Ash's hand as they snuck down the hallway to check in on Bri. Then he led Ash back to his room and shut the door, not bothering to turn on the light.

His chest began to ache as he slowly slipped his arms around his boyfriend's waist, pulled him in tight, and bent slightly to kiss him. Somehow, he needed to hold onto this moment forever, to sear the memory into his mind—the feel of Ash's body pressed up against him, the warmth of his lips, the taste of his mouth.

He broke the kiss and screwed his eyes shut as he buried his head into the crook of Ash's neck with a quiet groan.

"What?" Ash asked softly.

Lips pressed against his temple in a gesture that should have felt reassuring. Only, Cass couldn't push away the knowledge that this was their last night together, at least for a while. How long? If . . . if ever? Would they ever see each other again?

He'd really never questioned it before, even when leaving had been difficult and they hadn't had a solid plan in place. Now, though, that was all he could think—that he had no idea what the future held or if them being together was even part of it, because how could it be?

At the same time, he absolutely couldn't picture any future at all without Ash in it.

The intrusive thoughts continued to bombard him. He knew he was catastrophizing again, but he couldn't seem to stop it.

He tightened his arms around Ash. "I'm going to miss you," he admitted. He wanted to say more—and he knew he *needed* to—but no words would come.

"I'll miss you, too." Ash kissed Cass's temple again. "Hopefully we can make something work for August, after the summer session is over?"

Cass nodded and then slow-walked Ash over to the bed. They both undressed, letting their clothes drop to the floor, and crawled under the covers together. Cass immediately gathered Ash up in his arms and kissed him, again and again, softly and lovingly.

And he wished so, so much that the night would never end.



EARLY MORNING SUNLIGHT PEEKED around the edges of the curtains, casting thin yellow beams across Ash’s beautiful face as he slept. Cass smiled, though he felt only a deep, aching sadness, and he leaned in and pressed a light, gentle kiss on Ash’s forehead.

“I love you,” he whispered, finally saying the words out loud for the first time. A sharp pain rattled his chest, and he closed his eyes and bent his head forward to rest against Ash’s.

They hadn’t talked last night. Again. Cass had avoided bringing up anything heavy or following any line of conversation that might have led to a deeper discussion about their future.

He hated himself for it, because he knew it was wrong. He knew he was actively jeopardizing everything they’d built together, and he knew that as soon as Ash left today, that feeling would be even worse. The ache and sadness he felt now would be nothing in a few hours’ time.

So he should wake Ash up with a kiss, ask to talk, and then tell him all the things that had been running circles around his brain. How much he loved Ash and Bri. How he wanted their future together so much, more than anything. How . . . he knew that future couldn’t happen. He could never abandon his parents; they needed him here. And he could never ask Ash to leave Washington.

When he listed it out like that, logically, he *knew* it was ridiculous. He knew they should talk about it. Adults in relationships talked about things, compromised, worked things out. And maybe it wasn’t as big a deal as his mind was telling him it was. Maybe Ash would agree to move here, after he was done with school, of course.

But that was too much to ask, wasn’t it? Insisting Ash move here, cutting him off from the places where he felt closest to his sister—the trails, the forests, the water. And taking all of that away from Bri, too.

Several times now, he’d heard Ash talk about that—about how when she was old enough, he wanted to show her all the places his sister had loved, tell her about her mother, give her the gift of growing up there, in the Seattle area, where Ashlynn had.

That was important to Ash.

Cass understood.

And so, that talk they needed to have, the one about their future together . . . it was doomed to fail.

He only wished he'd seen that from the beginning.

He closed his eyes, hurt welling up in his chest, and he imagined not having this anymore. Ever. He imagined Ash leaving today, going back home. And he imagined never seeing him again. Never holding him. Never kissing him.

He imagined never feeling the warmth of Ash's smile again.

And he hadn't ever wanted to cry as much as he did right then.

"Mmm, good morning, gorgeous." Ash's lips brushed his, and fingers grazed lightly down his chest, stopping right at the hem of his boxers. "Bri isn't up yet?"

Cass shook his head. "Uh, no. I mean, I haven't heard her. It's still early. Not yet six." At least, that was his assumption, since he hadn't heard his dad up yet, either. With effort, he forced his eyes open and made himself smile at his boyfriend, who looked so peaceful, still half asleep, with his head resting on Cass's shoulder. He held Ash tighter and then kissed his forehead. "Can I make you breakfast? I know you wanted to get going early."

Ash nodded, though he frowned, and he closed the distance between them again, finding Cass's lips. When they parted, Ash said, "This week was perfect. I wish I didn't have to leave."

Cass couldn't answer. He pulled Ash closer to him and kissed him again.

The rest of the morning was a blur. They both got up. Ash started packing and took care of Bri while Cass threw on some clothes and headed out to the kitchen to make breakfast. Cooking was a good distraction, and by the time everyone had joined him at the kitchen table about a half hour later, he'd whipped up quite an excess of food—egg white omelets with spinach and peppers, diced potatoes, quartered strawberries, and an entire tray of little mini oatmeal blueberry muffins. Bri was more than happy with the assortment, and she dug right in. Cass himself barely ate, though, his stomach mildly upset. Around him, everyone seemed good. Happy, even. Ash talked with Cass's parents about the upcoming summer session at school and mentioned he was supposed to be getting his school placement

any day now, and Cass's mom told a short story about one of her first days in the classroom alone.

When everyone was finished eating, Cass's dad said his goodbyes, lingering in his hug with Bri for an extra few seconds before blowing a raspberry on her belly and making her squeal with delight. Then he left for work. Cass spent a few minutes with his mom, helping her get dressed and ready for her day, while Ash loaded up his car.

Then it was time.

Dread started creeping back in, all of his thoughts from earlier spiraling him down into a dark abyss.

Ash and Bri took turns carefully hugging his mom. Bri was as adorable as ever, her big, loud kiss goodbye followed by a joyful "bye-bye, I wuv you!"

The three of them then headed outside together, Bri insisting Cass carry her. She clung to him, kissing his cheek and saying sweet, adorable things like "I wuv you, too, Cass!" and "Un-ca Ash wuv Cass, too!" and "See you soooooon!"

While Ash started the car, Cass hugged Bri tight and said a quiet goodbye, kissing her cheek. Then he reluctantly let Ash take her and get her strapped into her car seat, Ollie the Octopus in her lap.

The sound of the car door shutting rattled through Cass's head, and he closed his eyes and dropped his chin. He wasn't ready. He wasn't ready for them to leave, but also, he wasn't ready to lose them. He wasn't ready for that heartbreak, and he wasn't ready to break Ash's heart. He couldn't.

God, he didn't know what to do.

Ash's hands settled on his chest, and Cass shook his head, though he wasn't sure exactly why.

"This isn't getting easier," he said, sniffling. He lifted his eyes and saw Ash's soft smile, full of love and understanding.

"I know."

"I'm going to miss you."

Ash's smile tightened, and he nodded gently before leaning in and touching his lips to Cass's. The kiss was short, but only because Ash pulled back, slid his hands up to frame Cass's face, and then tipped their foreheads together. They stayed there like that for several seconds. Then Ash kissed him again, a little deeper, lingering in it for a little longer.

“I had a great time,” Ash said when they parted. His voice was low and soft, and Cass wanted to memorize that, too, along with every kiss and touch and moment they’d spent together.

“Thank you for coming.”

Ash’s thumbs traced along the contours of Cass’s cheekbones, and then he let his hands slip back to settle on the middle of Cass’s chest. “I love you, Cass.”

The words took a second to register, but when they did, Cass’s heart nearly burst. A million emotions rushed through him, none stronger than the love he felt for the man standing in front of him.

He shook his head, overwhelmed and unable to respond. Then he wrapped his arms around Ash, tugged him in as close as he could, and kissed him with everything he had, their lips meeting in a caress that was gentle, even in its fierceness.

When he pulled back, Ash chased him, kissing him again and then once more, laughing. Joyful and happy.

God, it was such a beautiful thing.

A beautiful thing that he knew wouldn’t be able to last.

He closed his eyes, touched his cheek to Ash’s, and whispered, “I love you, too.”

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*Grant (Friday, June 16, 2023 – 10:08 p.m.):* whew first week over for me, this internship is no joke

*Grant (10:08 p.m.):* but they're doing good things here. I'm kinda excited to be part of it

*Grant (10:09 p.m.):* Sunday at Mei's new apartment, you have the address? swimming, pizza, and party! 12pm, don't be late!

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# Chapter Fifty-Three

## Ash

"SPWASH! SPWASH!" BRI GIGGLED and slapped her hands against the top of the water, sending drops flying every direction. Ash laughed, too, and then lifted her up out of the water and spun her around before dipping her back in.

"Ready to swim again?" he asked her, and she nodded.

"Yes, yes! I swim! I swim to . . ." She paused and looked around, her face scrunching up in concentration. Then she squealed and pointed over Ash's shoulder. "I swim to Mei! Mei! I swim! I coming! Ready?"

Grinning, Ash turned them around in the water to face Grant's girlfriend, Mei, and the rest of their small group of friends. Next to Mei, Grant and Enzo sat on the edge of the pool, talking about how their internships were going, and Jules, who hadn't grown much since they were in maybe eighth grade, had climbed up on Aden's shoulders and was threatening to splash Grant if he kept ignoring her. They'd been goofing around like old times, which had been both cathartic and depressing, since "old times" had always included Ashlynn.

Still, Ash found himself grateful for their shenanigans, glad for the distraction. He'd needed it ever since Thursday.

Bri squealed again, pulling him out of his head before he could spiral too deep.

"Mei! I coming!"

Mei nodded and smiled broadly, setting her drink down on the side of the pool. “Okay, okay, Bri, I’m ready! Come on, you can do it!”

Before Ash could even let her go, Bri started kicking both legs and paddling fiercely with both arms.

He chuckled. “Okay, don’t forget to take a breath first. And then go!”

She did as she’d practiced with him many times now, holding her breath and dropping just under the surface of the water as she moved her arms and legs not quite in sync. She worked her way slowly across the pool, and he stayed with her, keeping one hand under her and making sure she came up for air when she needed to. The last few feet, he stopped and let her swim on her own.

When she reached Mei, she giggled with delight. Then, the whole group passed her around for a bit, taking turns swimming her across the pool or shuttling her around on a mini boogie board one of them had brought. Mei took her first, then Grant. Then, Ezno, Jules, and Aden also each spent some time with Bri.

Ash watched from his perch on the edge of the pool, hiding his anxiety behind a distracted smile, as he’d been doing much of the day. No one questioned him about it, so he figured he must have gotten pretty good at faking it by now.

An hour passed, and then another. There was more pizza, a few friendly games of pool volleyball, and one or two quick dashes into the clubhouse when Bri loudly declared “I need go potty!,” something that had only started being a thing on Friday night. Finally, just after three, the party began to wind down.

Which was good.

Bri needed a nap, and Ash needed to crash.

He’d been worrying, growing more and more anxious as the weekend went on. The funny thing was, he wasn’t even sure exactly what was wrong. He just knew it was something.

Cass had been distant—Ash thought maybe that was the right word to describe it. Slow to respond to texts, reluctant to talk long on the phone, always ready with a reason he needed to hang up early, or at least what seemed like early given how long they usually stayed up talking every night.

He said “I love you, too” every time Ash offered up the “I love you” first—there was no hesitation, not even once. But there *was* a sadness in his

tone when he said it, and to Ash, it was unmistakable and clear.

Late last night, when he'd finally gotten Cass on the phone after calling multiple times, he'd tried again to ask Cass what was bothering him, like he had that first night back in California. He'd admitted he was worried and felt something was wrong, and he'd told Cass he really wanted to talk about it. Cass had gone silent for several seconds before insisting everything would be fine and there was nothing Ash needed to worry about.

That hadn't helped ease his concern at all.

Now, he hadn't heard from his boyfriend all day, even though he'd been periodically checking his phone, occasionally sending short texts, pictures of Bri being cute, memes—all the things he would normally be sending Cass.

"Un-ca Ash!"

He looked up when Bri called his name from over near the patio table. She was resting on Mei's hip, her sun hat on and a big cupcake in her hands. Blue frosting covered her lips and mouth, and a dot of it colored the very tip of her nose.

Ash grinned. "What do you have there?"

"Cake! I have cake!" she declared, and then she took another big bite, smearing more frosting on her face.

Mei laughed and shook her head. "Bri, did you have fun today?"

"Yes! Yes, fun! Thank you for cake!"

Ash pushed himself up off the ground, then headed over to the table, where his phone and clothes sat. He quickly threw his shorts and shirt on over his now-dry swimsuit and helped Mei and Grant finish cleaning up from the party. It was nearly four by the time he strapped Bri into her car seat and started the drive home.

His phone stayed disturbingly silent the whole drive, until he had just pulled into the parking garage at his apartment. The quiet buzz actually made his stomach drop, too, which wasn't the reaction he wished he had. Predictably, Bri had fallen asleep about halfway home, and so Ash parked in his usual spot and left the car running while he picked up his phone from the passenger seat.

The screen lit up with only one notification, and it was an email, not a text. He closed his eyes for a second, unsure how he felt about the tightness in his chest. Then he clicked on the notification and quickly skimmed the email.

*Issaquah.*

He'd been assigned to a kindergarten classroom at Sunset Elementary in the Issaquah School District. Pretty much exactly where he'd wanted to be. The email also reiterated what one of the counselors had told him—if he fit in well at the placement school *and* they had an opening, there was a good chance he could be offered a position after he graduated.

For a moment, his heart raced with both happiness and hope, his mind already jumping forward to the future. He could move there, be closer to where he and his sister had grown up in Renton and to the trails he and Bri loved to hike. Maybe not this year, since he'd still have classes at school, too, and since Bri was comfortable with her current daycare providers. But in the future . . . after he graduated, and after he and Cass decided—

Without even thinking about it, he'd switched to his phone app to call his boyfriend. But his stomach knotted up as he stared at the call button, his finger hovering over it.

Would Cass *want* to hear the news? And actually, what did all of this mean for their future? And . . . why hadn't they already talked about it?

A sick twisting pain coiled its way through Ash's stomach. Was this what Cass had been silently upset about for the last . . . however-long? The future?

Ash's hand dropped to his lap, his excitement forgotten, and he shut his eyes and let his head fall back against the headrest. Was that it? He replayed the last week and a half—all the moments he could remember where Cass had hesitated, frowned, seemed to pull away; all the times Ash had mentioned the future, work, planning, moving, even when their next time together would be.

God, maybe that *was* it.

He clenched his jaw and looked back down at Cass's name on his phone.

*"I love you, too."*

His heart leapt but then tumbled in the very next second, a sharp pain lancing through his chest. Cass meant those words, Ash believed it with all of his being. There was no doubt in his mind at all. But the sadness, the hesitation, the despondency . . .

*If* that was it, *if* Cass was getting so anxious thinking about the future, why hadn't he taken Ash up on any of his offers to talk about it? He'd tried several times over the last couple of weeks, including on the phone last

night and in California last week. They'd always talked about everything; it was the only way their long-distance relationship had worked so well. And of course it was complicated and challenging and sometimes even heartbreaking being apart for all that time. But they'd both known it wasn't going to be easy going in. And, until recently, Cass had always seemed happy, even when things *were* hard.

God, what if . . .

Ash couldn't even let himself finish the thought. It hurt too much to consider.

It also hurt when he hit the power button to black out the screen and stuffed his phone in his pocket rather than calling Cass to tell him the good news.

And it hurt even more when he shut the car off, got out, and opened the back passenger door, seeing his niece there, comfortably asleep in her car seat with Ollie the Octopus in her lap.

Because although they hadn't talked about it, every single version of the future that Ash had imagined had Cass right there in it, with the two of them. Every single version had more of those beautiful, soft, happy moments where Cass read Bri her bedtime story, tucked her into bed, kissed her forehead gently. Every single version, without fail, had Ash cuddling up in the arms of the man he loved, every night, for the rest of their lives.

He'd worked so, so hard over the last year and a half to even get himself to the point where he could *consider* a future in which he was happy. And it was because of Cass—his friendship, his love, his support—that Ash had gotten to where he was now.

The thought of losing that future . . .

He closed his eyes, fighting back against the pain still coursing through his heart. Then he took a long, slow breath and let it back out before stepping up to unstrap Bri so he could take her inside.

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*Ash (Sunday, June 18, 2023 – 5:55 p.m.):* Can I call later?

*Ash (5:56 p.m.):* I think we should talk <3

*Ash (6:04 p.m.):* I love you

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# Chapter Fifty-Four

## *Cass*

CASS'S PHONE RANG FROM his pocket for the third time that evening. Hiding his pain behind a fake, sheepish smile, he ducked his head, pulled the phone out, and pretended not to see Ash's name light up the screen as he powered it down without answering.

He must love torturing himself.

That was the only explanation for why he hadn't set his phone on silent sooner and why he'd still been letting himself hear it ring every time Ash called. As a punishment.

Sunday had been bad enough—getting all of Ash's text messages throughout the day and seeing as his tone slowly became more and more unsure and reserved. Ash's plea for a call so they could talk had hit Cass hard, and he hated himself for outright ignoring it, pretending he hadn't seen it and then going about the rest of his evening and night. Ash had called, then. Twice. And left a voicemail.

Cass had made himself listen to it, though he'd cried into his pillow when he heard the confusion and sadness in Ash's voice.

Yesterday had been even worse, his guilt and shame and heartbreak continuing to build when Ash's desperate string of text messages had come through near the end of the day.

*I'm really worried. Please call me*

*Whatever it is, we can talk about it*

*Did I do something wrong? I can't fix it if I don't know what the problem is*

He'd left them all unanswered.

Ash had called again, too, but hadn't left a voicemail that time.

And Cass didn't blame him. He fully blamed himself. For everything. He just felt paralyzed. Completely and utterly unable to do what he knew he needed to.

"Can I get you more potatoes or anything, ma?"

He pasted another of those nauseating, fake smiles on his face and forced himself to glance up across the table. His mom had finished the last bites of her dinner, her good hand shaking slightly as she set her spoon down, and his dad sat next to her, leaning back in his chair with his reading glasses perched on his nose as he worked on the crossword puzzle from yesterday's newspaper.

Both of them looked concerned. Especially his dad.

His mom spoke after another moment, her expression softening as she gave a small shake of her head. "No, dear, I think I'm pretty full."

"Okay. How about you, Dad?"

His dad's frown deepened, and he shook his head as well.

With a nod, Cass pushed back his chair and stood, starting to gather the dishes so he could wash them. When he reached over to take his mom's plate, his dad cleared his throat. Cass froze, his jaw clenching.

"I'll handle the dishes tonight," the older man said.

Cass's mom added quietly, "So you can call your boyfriend back."

His shoulders tensed, and he held himself still for a count of three before he managed to look back up. His dad was standing now, pushing the chair back in as he began stacking the used dinner plates and dishes. And his mom's smile had faded, her eyes worried.

Immediately, he shook his head. "No, no, Dad, please, let me—"

"Caspian." His mom's good hand settled on top of his and squeezed lightly, cutting off his protest.

Cass dropped his chin. "Sorry, ma, I just, um . . ."

What could he even say? He'd been avoiding Ash for days now, and he felt terrible about it. Had he ever done anything like this before? Something he knew was one hundred percent the wrong thing to do, knowingly hurting someone else, all so he wouldn't have to face reality and deal with the impossible issue of their future?

No.

He hadn’t.

Because that wasn’t who he was.

Or apparently, it was. Apparently, he did have it in him to hurt the man he loved, all because he was scared—terrified, actually—of losing him.

It made no sense.

His dad set the stack of dishes in the sink, the sound jarring Cass back to the present. He lifted his chin again, meeting his mom’s eyes.

“If you can’t talk to him,” his mom said, patting Cass’s hand, “sit and talk to me. It’s not good for you to keep everything bottled up all the time.”

She was right. Again. And yet, the prospect of telling her what was bothering him almost hurt as much as the prospect of telling Ash. For about the entire first year after her stroke, she’d struggled with heavy guilt herself. He remembered how she used to apologize to him almost weekly, ashamed that he’d put his life on hold for her. He’d never wanted her to feel that way. Even now, even with all the pain, even with the fact that his whole future *was* being put on hold, or worse, he *still* didn’t want her to feel that way.

But he couldn’t lie to her. And she was right. He did need to let it out.

And maybe if he talked to them, it would be easier to accept the inevitable and tell Ash.

His heart ripped in two at the thought, and he let out a shuddering breath as he slumped back into his chair. “I don’t . . . I don’t know where to start,” he admitted. He rested his elbows on the table and lowered his head to his hands.

His chest hurt, and he could feel the buzz of anxiety starting in his fingers.

“Did something happen between you and Ash?” his mom prompted, her voice soft and sweet and understanding.

He wished he felt reassured by it.

He forced a breath and then shook his head. “Not really.”

“Well, then,” his dad said, “why’ve you been avoiding the man’s calls for the last several days, kiddo?” The water turned on at the sink, and Cass heard the sound of his dad scrubbing a plate.

He screwed his eyes shut and swallowed hard. The urge to avoid answering the question, to duck away, shake his head, deny . . . it was nearly overpowering. The shame and guilt were worse, however.

“Because I have to,” he said, and when he realized that would make no sense to them, he raked a hand through his hair and tried again. “I mean, because I—” His voice cracked, and he clenched his jaw, suddenly angry at himself for the whole mess. It was a mess. A mess he’d started because he’d been too naïve and too optimistic and hadn’t thought things through. And now he was going to hurt Ash in the worst way.

And that hurt *him* so much.

His dad had stopped scrubbing dishes and was facing him, resting against the counter while drying his hands on a dish towel. His expression was oddly understanding and gentle, like Cass’s mom’s; only, he wasn’t used to seeing that from his dad.

He dropped his eyes to his hands again and said, “Ash deserves more than I can give him. More than I’ll ever be able to give him.”

“Now, why would you say that?” his mom asked softly.

Cass shook his head. “Because I won’t ever be able to be *there* with him, ma. Not for more than a few days at a time. And that’s no one’s fault or anything. It’s just how it is.” Something inside him shattered, an aching grief assaulting him from every direction, and he reached up and rubbed his eyes, desperate to *not* cry in front of his dad. “I love him,” he said. “I love him so much, but we have no future together, and I’ve been avoiding him because I can’t get myself to tell him that. It’s not fair to him. It’s not right. But it hurts too much.”

There was silence in the room around him, and Cass couldn’t take it. He shook his head again and wiped his eyes, cursing at himself under his breath for the tears that had started to fall. Then he pushed himself back from the table and stood, his eyes firmly trained on the ground.

“If you’re doing the dishes, Dad, I’m gonna—”

“Caspian,” his mom cut back in, her voice still soft and kind.

He ignored her.

“I’m gonna go to bed early tonight, and—”

His dad’s hand set heavily on his shoulder, and he found himself being turned around. Then two strong arms wrapped around him, pulling him into a warm, solid hug. He closed his eyes and returned the embrace as an immediate sense of relief and comfort washed over him.

“We should talk, kiddo,” his dad said quietly. “Your mom and I have some things to share with you. And I think it might help.”

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*Cass (Wednesday, June 21, 2023 – 1:09 a.m.):* <3

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# Chapter Fifty-Five

## *Ash*

"OKAY, OKAY, BRI. YES, here, it's your turn to talk to Auntie Shaina." Ash tried not to grimace as he handed Bri the phone, shifting her carefully on his hip.

She immediately started talking, greeting Shaina with an enthusiastic "Hi!" before jumping straight into telling Shaina about her day. She talked and talked, barely stopping to breathe or to give Shaina any time to make sense of her babbling. It was adorable, as Bri always was. But Ash found himself feeling completely worn out, each step on their walk from the daycare center to home heavier and slower.

At least he wasn't the one talking to Shaina right now. One more minute on the phone with her, and she'd have known just how not okay he was.

He definitely couldn't fake it anymore.

Getting through his first day of summer school classes yesterday had been enough of a struggle. By all accounts, the day had been a success, including the half day of in-classroom fieldwork at the nearby elementary school he'd been assigned to for the summer; however, Ash had fought through every minute. He'd had to remind himself to focus, constantly pull himself back to the present and stop letting his mind wander. He'd had to force a smile, pretend he was okay, actively mask the deep sadness inside him.

He hadn't slept last night, either, and so, today had been even worse. All day long, he'd felt like he'd been trudging through a thick, heavy fog.

Chilled and hopeless.

So much like how he'd felt in the beginning, right after his sister's death.

And now, he didn't know what to do.

Cass's late-night text message—nothing more than a heart emoji after *days* of ignoring Ash's calls and texts—hadn't helped much, especially because when Ash had tried calling this morning while on his walk to campus after dropping Bri off at daycare, he'd gotten no answer. Again.

He was hurt. Hurt and confused and completely heartbroken.

"Yay! Yes! I see you soon!" Bri declared, bouncing on Ash's hip. "Un-ca Ash, we see Shaina soon!"

"Oh?" he said, forcing a smile as he rounded the corner and saw their apartment building a block or so down on their left.

"Yes! Shaina say yes!"

Ash laughed lightly. "Okay, well, why don't you let me talk to her so I can see when she'll be here?"

"Okay, yes, yes." Bri nodded. "Bye-bye, see you soon!" she added into the phone before handing it back to Ash.

He took an extra second, trying to shove all of his worry and grief deep, deep down, and then he lifted the phone up to his ear. "So, what's this about you visiting?"

"Yeah! That's what I was going to mention before Bri stole your phone," Shaina explained with a laugh. She sounded so upbeat and happy, and with a painful ache of longing, Ash suddenly wished she was here to hug him and tell him everything would be okay. "So," she continued, "you know my summer classes for med school start midweek next week, which I'm half panicking about, by the way, and I was kinda planning to start studying a bit to get ahead. But Dad promised me I'm going to be fine and that I should *really* take my week off because if I don't, I'm going to regret it later. Then he suggested I come up to see you and Grant and everyone for a few days. And it's been a while, you know? I miss you. Is that okay? I know you have classes and stuff. But I could watch Bri, maybe take her to the zoo or the aquarium, and we could go hiking on the weekend. How does that sound?"

It sounded like exactly what he needed . . . assuming he didn't completely break down before then.

“Yeah, totally. That works,” he replied, keeping his tone level. He paused under the awning outside of his building, and Bri squirmed a little in his arms, wanting to be set down. He bent over and lowered her feet gently to the ground, then took her hand to keep her close. “I wish I could talk more, but we just got home, and I have a ton of work to do before class tomorrow, so can I maybe call you back later?”

There was the slightest hesitation on the other end, and it was probably nothing; after all, Ash hadn’t given anything away. His stomach knotted up all the same.

“Sorry, Mom was texting me asking if she should buy the plane ticket,” Shaina said after another second. “Sure, yeah, call or text. And I’ll send you the flight details. I think I’ll be in Thursday, out the following Tuesday.”

“Perfect.” He swallowed and tightened his hand around Bri’s. “I can’t wait to see you, Shai,” he said quietly, unable to keep all of the emotion out of his voice this time. “I’ve missed you too.”

“You better have! It’s been too long. I can’t wait.”

They said their goodbyes and hung up, Ash promising again to text or call later when he had the chance. Shaina seemed none the wiser to his internal struggle, and he hoped he could keep it that way, at least until Thursday. He knew she’d see right through him the second they were together in person.

“Ready to go up, sweet girl?” he asked Bri, stuffing his phone back into his pocket without even bothering to check his texts. He had none, he was sure. Or no important ones, anyway.

Bri jumped up and down, grinning. “Yes! I hungry.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes! We can have cake!”

Ash laughed and reached ahead of them to open the door to the lobby. “Is that so? Cake? For dinner?”

“Yes! Dinner is cake!” Bri agreed, and then she went on, listing all the other foods they could also have to go with their cake as she dragged Ash over to the stairs.

He was exhausted enough that he almost wanted to insist they take the elevator, but he let her lead him toward the stairs anyway, listening with half an ear as she continued chattering. Just like on the whole walk home, each step felt heavier than the last, and he finally failed completely, unable to keep holding himself together as his thoughts started to spiral.

He jumped back a day, two days, a week, remembering how the pain had slowly worked its way in as he'd realized something wasn't right. Then, without meaning to, he jumped back further to first hugs, first kisses. Intimacy he'd forever craved and only recently found. Friendship, support, hope. He remembered the early days when they'd first started texting and talking, how he'd finally felt seen and how hard it had been to open up and let himself be vulnerable. How hard it had been to trust.

And he remembered the moment he'd known he was in love.

Cass was it.

He was the one.

It felt like he'd climbed an *entire* mountain to get there, to allow himself that, only to have lost his footing right at the peak. Now, he was sliding down a steep slope with no one to stop his fall.

He was completely alone. Again.

He didn't know what to do or who to turn to. He didn't know what had gone wrong or whether he'd done anything to cause it. He only knew he'd tried everything he could. He'd tried and tried and tried to get Cass to talk.

Short of going down to California and knocking on Cass's door—

His heart clenched. He'd do it. If that was what it took, he'd do it in a heartbeat. Except he couldn't. He had school. And Bri. And—

"Cass!"

Bri tugged hard as they stepped out of the stairwell, pulling her hand out of Ash's. Then she took off down the hallway, toward their apartment a couple of doors down . . . where a tall man in a well-worn pair of dark-wash jeans and a medium-gray T-shirt was pushing himself up from the floor, a small bouquet of maybe half a dozen red and yellow roses in one hand.

Ash's feet stuck to the ground, and he stopped short, his heart skipping several beats as he watched his niece run straight at Cass and launch herself into his arms with a squeal of delight.

"Cass, you here! Un-ca Ash, Cass is here!" She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tight, and he seemed to close his eyes with relief as he hugged her back.

Ash still couldn't move from his spot near the stairwell door, though his heart raced unevenly and his hands began to tremble. His mouth fell partway open, but no words would come, either. Slowly, his body unstuck, and he managed a short, sharp breath and then another, trying to fill his lungs.

Cass was here. He was here, standing in front of Ash's door, a bouquet of roses in one hand as he clung tight to Bri. And he looked totally, completely overwhelmed and unsure. And when he finally opened his eyes and glanced in Ash's direction, his expression was filled with sorrow and regret and what had to be shame.

He appeared to try for a smile, but it was reluctant and small. He shifted Bri to one hip. "Hi, um . . ."

A flood of emotions broke down all the walls Ash had built up to get through the last few days. He still had no idea what was going on, or why Cass was here, or what had happened, but he stumbled forward, his legs nearly giving out, and when he reached Cass, he let himself fall into Cass's arms, trusting he'd be caught. His arm looped around Cass's waist, and he exhaled a slow breath.

Bri, the adorable child she was, giggled happily from her perch on Cass's hip. "Un-ca Ash, Cass is here!" she repeated.

All Ash could do was nod.

Soft lips pressed tentatively against his cheek, and Cass's deep voice shook as he whispered into Ash's ear, "I'm so, so sorry. Please forgive me."

There was a pain in Cass's words that Ash felt acutely. He straightened and took half a step backward, his expression tight as he met Cass's eyes.

"Tell me you're here to talk?" Ash said quietly. "And . . ." He hesitated, his stomach churning. He didn't even want to say the words out loud, but he knew he had to. "And not . . . to break up with me."

Cass's face paled, and he quickly shook his head. "I'm here to talk. And I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you." Cass pressed his hand gently into Ash's lower back. "I'm so sorry," he repeated, his voice wavering again. "I never meant to hurt you."

With a nod, Ash dropped his chin. "Let's go inside?"

"Inside!" Bri agreed. "To have cake!"

Cass's eyebrows arched, and Ash shook his head as he stepped back and stuffed his hand in his pocket to get his keys. "She thinks cake is for dinner tonight."

"Ah."

"It is!" Bri clapped. "Cake for you too!"

Cass huffed a laugh. "Do you even have cake?"

"Nope," Ash said, trying for a small smile. He stuck the key in the lock and pushed open the door to his apartment. "But she's adamant we do and

that that's what's for dinner. And dessert."

"Yes!"

The little bit of levity from Bri's declaration of their dinner plans seemed to vanish when Ash motioned for Cass to enter the apartment ahead of him. Tension creeped back into his shoulders as he followed his boyfriend and niece inside and shut the door behind them.

Bri immediately took off toward the bathroom, yelling "I go potty!" as soon as Cass set her down. With a grimace, Ash lowered the diaper bag to the floor next to the front door.

"She's probably not actually going to go, but just in case . . ." Ash shrugged. "I'll be right back. Um . . . make yourself comfortable?"

He hated how awkward that sounded, but Cass just nodded stiffly, and so Ash turned and headed after Bri.

Several minutes later, Ash helped Bri finish drying her hands and then followed her back out of the bathroom. He paused at the end of the hallway, shoving his hands in his pockets to keep them from shaking. Bri had hurried on ahead and climbed up into Cass's lap. She smiled brightly as she stood on his thighs so she could lean in and smell the roses Cass had brought, which now sat in a glass vase on the table. Cass was talking to her quietly, and she nodded with a contemplative "Oh, yes, yes, I see."

Ash smiled at that, even though he had no idea what Cass had said. And when Bri turned and wrapped her little arms around Cass's neck and gave him a big kiss on the cheek, Ash's chest tightened.

God, he didn't want to lose this. He couldn't.

He cleared his throat and took a step forward, and as soon as Bri saw him, her face broke out in a huge grin. She climbed down off Cass's lap and then raced over and grabbed Ash's hand.

"There six fwowers! I count them! See!" She tugged Ash over, crawled back up onto Cass, and pointed to each of the flowers as she counted. "One, two, three, four, five, six! Six!"

"Wow, yeah, I see. What wonderful counting," Ash said, trying to infuse as much enthusiasm as he could into his words. He knew he was falling short, but thankfully, Bri didn't seem to notice. She clapped and laughed and then, without Ash even asking, slid down off Cass's lap and ran over to her toy box, which she promptly dumped over.

Ash kept his eyes on her, even though he wasn't really watching her. He just couldn't move again; he was too scared to face Cass, not quite ready to

hear whatever it was Cass had to say.

Still, he felt the second Cass stood up and shifted closer to him, and when Cass tentatively set his hand on Ash's back, Ash closed his eyes and dropped his chin, his body shuddering with relief. Cass rubbed his lower back gently, and Ash took a slow, deep breath as his racing heart started to calm.

"Sorry to just show up like this," Cass said quietly. "I, uh . . ." He paused, and Ash felt him trembling again. "I knew I needed to talk to you in person, not over the phone, especially after . . . um, after the last few days."

With a short nod, Ash finally made himself turn around, his palms coming to settle on Cass's chest. Through the thin cotton of Cass's shirt, Ash could feel Cass's heart hammering. He frowned and stared at his hands for several seconds before lifting his eyes.

Cass wasn't smiling; in fact, Ash thought he could almost see tears accompanying the worry and shame in Cass's eyes. He sucked in a breath and looked back at his hands.

"It hurt. A lot. That you . . . that you didn't answer or call me back or . . . or anything," he said, forcing the words out. "I didn't know what to think. I . . . I actually still don't know what to think." He dropped his hands down and shoved them back in his pockets, fighting the sudden urge to pull away altogether.

"I know." Cass's voice was filled with pain.

God, they were *both* hurting so much.

Ash's jaw quivered, and he pursed his lips and blinked back tears. "Why, though? What happened? What did I do? Why . . . why wouldn't you just talk to me?"

Even though Cass had said he was here to talk—hell, he'd flown up here, Ash assumed, and must have been sitting outside of Ash's apartment, waiting for hours for him to get home—he seemed tongue-tied now, unsure and scared to speak. He frowned and brought his hands up to rest on Ash's upper arms, and he squeezed gently.

Then he finally said, "It started a while back, actually." He lowered his hands and blew out a breath. "Um, can we sit? Here or on the couch, wherever you're more comfortable. I need to tell you everything."

Ash nodded, and he glanced over at where Bri sat, playing by herself on the floor. She had stacks of blocks—each stack three blocks tall—neatly lined up in front of her, and she was babbling to herself as she went,

methodically adding one more block to each stack. He swallowed hard and then tipped his head to the table.

"Maybe we sit here?"

"Sure, yeah."

Together, they moved to the table and sat. Then, in awkward speech punctuated by anxious pauses and jumbled stuttering, Cass began to explain himself.

"Last month, remember when my mom had to go to the hospital?"

Ash nodded. "She had leg pain?"

"Yeah. It . . . it was really scary for me." Cass's hands fidgeted in his lap. Ash wanted to reach over and comfort him, but he didn't move. "And I think that's when it started to get into my head that, um . . . that this thing between us couldn't ever work out."

The words tore at Ash's heart, and he lowered his eyes, his jaw tightening.

Cass continued, his voice shaky and low. "It got worse and worse. And I convinced myself, somehow, that, um . . . that I *shouldn't* talk to you about it, because it would just hurt you. Even though I knew it was already hurting you."

"But why—"

"Because my mom," Cass cut in, the words forced out on a fast breath. "B-because I can't leave them—my parents. They need me. And—and I had seen how happy you were up here, when we went hiking at Snow Lake. I saw that you *need* to be here, where you feel close to your sister. And all I could think, over and over and over, was that I *needed* to be there, in California, with my parents. You needed to be here, and I needed to be there. And that was *never* going to change. And so, it all started to spiral in my head. I knew I was hurting you by keeping you in the dark—you could see I was struggling, and you asked me what was wrong more than once, and I couldn't tell you. I couldn't do it. So I lied. I—I hated that, and I'm so, so sorry. In my head, any conversation I started would inevitably end with us . . . being . . . done and w-with you—" Cass shook his head and reached up to swipe at his eyes before returning his hand to his lap. "I couldn't talk to you because I couldn't hurt you like that, but I *was* hurting you—both of us, really—by not talking to you. It was a vicious cycle that just kept getting worse the longer I let it go on."

Ash closed his eyes for a second and nodded slowly. He understood now, sort of. He'd already known they were going to have to make some big compromises at some point down the road. Right from the beginning, he'd seen how important Cass's parents were to him and how he felt responsible for helping out with his mom's care. Ash wouldn't have expected Cass to just abandon them. But Cass was also right that Ash felt a need to be here, in Washington, where he'd grown up. All of his memories of his family—including his parents—were here, and he *did* want to raise Bri here too.

But it still hurt, especially hearing Cass admit he'd deliberately lied.

"We have to talk about these things, Cass," he said quietly. "Even if they're hard, and even if it's uncomfortable." He scooted forward in his chair until his knees bumped Cass's. Then he reached out and covered Cass's hands with his own. Cass stopped fidgeting.

"I know," Cass mumbled. "I even knew that as I was actively pushing you away. I hated myself for it. I'm so sorry. I couldn't . . . I couldn't stop . . . assuming the worst."

"Me too," Ash admitted. "I thought . . ." He couldn't finish the sentence, and when he glanced up, the pain in Cass's expression had deepened.

"I'm sorry, Ash," Cass repeated. A tear slipped down his cheek.

Ash swallowed and squeezed Cass's hands. "What changed?" he asked. "I mean, why are you here now? You're not still . . . 'assuming the worst'?"

Cass shook his head but didn't answer right away, and Bri took that moment to remind them she was there, running over with a brightly colored block in each hand.

"One for Cass!" she said, handing Cass a blue block. She then gave Ash a yellow block. "And one for Un-ca Ash! I hungry. We have cake?"

Ash couldn't not laugh at that. "No, sweet girl, we don't have cake. But"—he set the block on the table and stood, lifting her up with him—"we do have leftover raviolis from yesterday. How does that sound?"

She made a pouty face but reluctantly agreed that they didn't *have* to have cake for dinner. Ash settled her in her high chair and then heated up a bowl of cheese-and-spinach raviolis for her. He wasn't hungry, and neither was Cass, so they let her eat while they continued talking.

It took Cass a moment to get started again, and Ash didn't miss the way he lowered his voice and how he couldn't look Ash in the eye when he began speaking.

“I’m here because I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.” Ash settled his hands on top of Cass’s again.

Cass closed his eyes and continued. “I thought—I mean, I *really*, *honestly* thought there was no way. And it was tearing me up, and like I said before, the longer the thoughts were there, the worse they got, and I had myself convinced I had to—to b-break up with you because it would only get harder.”

“Cass . . .”

“I wasn’t thinking clearly. My—my parents finally got me to talk to them last night. And—and they . . .” Cass lifted his chin and managed to hold Ash’s gaze for a few seconds this time before dropping his eyes back to their hands with a dry laugh. “They knocked some sense into me.”

Ash frowned, but Cass continued before he could say anything.

“They told me they’ve never expected me to stay home and not work and just take care of my mom forever, and I guess they’ve been talking about it for a while, now—about what will happen in the future, when I’m done with school or when I”—he smiled weakly and glanced up at Ash—“find someone. And um, they said they’ve been making plans for my dad to retire when he turns sixty next year, so he can be with my mom full time. They’ve thought about selling the house, too, and moving into a condo or something smaller that will be easier to maintain. And they said—” His voice caught, and for the first time that evening, his expression seemed to light up a little. “They told me they are not opposed to moving to stay close to me if—if you and I wanted to be together.”

“Really?” The word slipped out before Ash could stop it.

Cass nodded. “Yeah. I mean, it won’t be right away. My dad is hoping to wait to retire until he’s sixty because of how his pension works. But after that . . .”

Ash stood, pulling Cass up with him, and he wrapped his arms tightly around Cass’s waist. Cass returned the embrace, burying his head in the crook of Ash’s neck. Cass was still trembling, and now that Ash held him, he could feel it. He squeezed tighter and turned his head to press a kiss to Cass’s cheek.

“I would really like to talk more about all of that, about the future,” he said softly. “Because that’s what I want more than anything—a future with you.”

Cass inhaled sharply and nodded again, still clinging to Ash. “I’ll do better, too. I promise. I’m so sorry for—”

Ash cut off his apology with a kiss that quickly deepened, both of them seeking comfort in it.

He understood. It still hurt—that Cass had held back so much and had let things get so bad so quickly. But he understood how heavy and illogical emotions could be, how they could spiral out of control at the drop of a hat. He also believed Cass when he said it wouldn’t happen again. And more than anything, he had nothing but love for the man who now held him so carefully and kissed him so tenderly.

From the other side of the table, Bri squealed and clapped her hands. “Un-ca Ash wuv Cass! Kiss! Mwah!”

They broke their kiss as they both laughed, Cass still holding Ash tight.

“I do,” Ash said. He pressed another light kiss to Cass’s lips. “I love you.”

Cass laughed again and kissed him back. “I love you, too. Always.”

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*Dad (Wednesday, June 21, 2023 – 8:14 p.m.):* Your mom is asking for an update

*Dad (8:15 p.m.):* Actually, it’s me. I’m asking for an update

*Dad (8:15 p.m.):* Love you <3

*Dad (8:16 p.m.):* Tell Ash and Bri we said hi

*OceanofPDF.com*

# Chapter Fifty-Six

## Cass

WARM HANDS SLID SLOWLY up Cass's bare chest, and he groaned and wrapped his arms around his boyfriend, shifting so Ash lay on top of him.

"Good morning," Ash whispered against Cass's lips. Then they kissed, softly and tenderly, with no urgency at all. As though they had all the time in the world.

They didn't; they had only a couple of hours. Ash had to drop Bri off at daycare and then be at school by eight thirty, and Cass's flight back to Redding left in the early afternoon. But that didn't send Cass into a spiral this time, not like it had when Ash had been getting ready to leave Redding just a week ago.

They'd stayed up late last night, talking more about so many things they should have already talked about—the future, eventually moving in together, career plans, Bri. They'd also made travel arrangements for the rest of the summer already. Cass was going to fly up for one weekend in mid-July, although it would just be a quick overnight trip, and then Ash and Bri would drive down to Redding for an extended three-week-long trip from late August to mid-September, during the autumn break before the next session of classes started up for both of them.

Knowing that and having those trips already planned had made Cass feel so much better, even if his heart would still ache when he and Ash parted ways today.

He tightened his arms around Ash and kissed him again. “Mmm, I can’t wait to have this *every* morning,” he murmured.

Ash smiled against his lips. “Soon.”

He nodded, but another of those deep stabs of guilt hit him.

He’d almost lost this. He’d almost let this slip away, all because he’d convinced himself there were no other options.

Closing his eyes, he leaned his head forward against Ash’s shoulder. “I love you so much,” he said quietly, fighting the urge to apologize *again*.

Rather than answer, Ash propped himself up on his elbows and then smiled softly down at Cass before lowering his mouth for another kiss. It was everything—warmth, comfort, reassurance. Ash then settled back on Cass’s chest with what Cass wanted to believe was a happy sigh.

“I need to get up and take a quick shower,” Ash said after another few seconds. He lifted his head off Cass’s chest and gave him a teasing smirk. “Wanna join me?”

Heat rushed to Cass’s cheeks, and he grinned. “That sounds—”

From across the room, Bri mumbled something incoherent as she shifted around in her crib and then stood, gripping Ollie the Octopus tightly in her arms. “Un-ca Ashhhhhhh,” she whined, clearly still sleepy and grumpy.

Ash groaned quietly, dropping his forehead back to Cass’s shoulder. “Never mind, I guess. Next time, maybe,” he grumbled.

With a light laugh, Cass kissed the top of Ash’s head. “Definitely next time. How about Bri and I make breakfast while you shower and get ready?”

Grumbling again in agreement, Ash rolled over off of Cass and climbed out of bed. He gathered Bri up out of the crib and cuddled with her for a few minutes before handing her off to Cass and disappearing into the bathroom to shower and get dressed.

By the time he was finished, Cass and Bri had the table set with a simple breakfast of fruit, mini blueberry pancakes, and scrambled eggs with spinach and peppers. Bri was wide awake and happy, and she stuffed her face, declaring “This is so good!” every few bites. When they were done eating, Ash whisked Bri away to get her dressed and ready for her day, while Cass did the dishes and cleaned up. At about seven thirty, they all headed out on the short walk to the daycare center together, Bri skipping happily as she held Ash’s hand.

They stopped outside of the daycare, and Cass tried not to get too emotional as he hugged Bri goodbye. She hugged him back tightly and then dropped a huge kiss on his cheek with her very dramatic “Mwah!,” like she always had.

“See Cass soon?” she asked sweetly when Ash took her back, settling her on his hip.

“Yes, very soon!” Cass smiled, though his heart hurt a little. “Only a few weeks, and I’ll be back.”

“Okay, yes!” Bri agreed. Then she very deliberately turned to Ash and set her hands on his cheeks. “Un-ca Ash, Cass be back soon. Don’t be sad,” she said. And she hugged him too.

Ash closed his eyes and rested his head against hers. “Thank you, sweet girl. I’m very happy right now, actually.”

“Good!” she declared. She gave him a kiss, and then Ash took her inside and dropped her off.

When he came back out, Ash slipped his hand into Cass’s.

“It’s not quite a mile to the elementary school. You want to walk with me?” Ash asked, leading them back toward Pacific Street.

Cass squeezed his hand. “Of course.”

The morning was partly overcast but warm, and they walked unhurriedly along the route, mostly in silence. When they reached the very edge of the school grounds, Ash stopped them in the shade of a small tree and stepped in front of Cass, taking both of his hands.

“Thank you for coming up here,” Ash said quietly. “I . . . I really needed that after, um, the last week.” He laughed, almost to himself, and then added, “Actually, on the walk home yesterday, I’d nearly convinced myself that I needed to fly back down to California and knock on your door so we could talk. I would have, too,” he said, “if that’s what it took.”

Cass shook his head ever so slightly, any lingering guilt and shame he had overpowered by all the love and conviction he heard in his boyfriend’s voice. “You’re incredible, you know that?”

Ash’s cheeks flushed, and he smiled and dropped his chin. “I just love you. And I need you to know that’s not going to change. Ever. And . . . and no matter what challenges we face, we’ll figure them out, together. I love you, Cass. Always.”

With a soft exhale, Cass slipped his arms around Ash’s waist and pulled him in tight. The embrace was comforting and warm, filled with hope. He

closed his eyes and let the feeling wash over him. Then he squeezed Ash gently and kissed his cheek.

“I love you, too,” he whispered, holding on for another long second before letting go.

“Call me tonight?” Ash stepped back, but his smile brightened, and his eyes shone with eagerness and love.

Cass nodded. “I will.”

Ash’s grin turned silly. “*And* tomorrow,” he said with mock-seriousness.

“And tomorrow, too.”

“And the day after.”

With a laugh, Cass pulled Ash back in closer to him and brushed another soft kiss on his lips. “And the day after. And the day after that. And the day after that. *Every* day.”

“Forever.”

Cass nodded, and he kissed Ash again and then one more time. Then he tipped their foreheads together as a wonderful, calm contentment spread through him. It felt good. Right. Perfect.

And with another smile, he whispered, “Every day. Forever. *Always*.”

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# Epilogue

## Cass

*ONE YEAR LATER . . .*

Cass closed the front door behind him with a sigh and set his keys on the table just inside the entryway. The apartment was quiet and dark, the only illumination coming from the oven light above the stove in the kitchen.

His stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since breakfast, and with a frown, he slipped off his shoes, kicking them over to the mat next to the door, and padded slowly through the small apartment to the kitchen.

A note on the whiteboard on the fridge read "Dinner's in the microwave <3," and that brought a small, tired smile to Cass's face. He took a moment to reheat his dinner—a good-sized portion of what looked to be a black bean and rice casserole—and then settled at the table to eat.

His phone buzzed as he sat down, and he pulled it out of his pocket.

*Ash (9:33 p.m.):* She's finally asleep. Only took forty-five minutes tonight. Progress! xD

*Ash (9:34 p.m.):* I'll be out in a few <3

Rather than text back, which carried a high risk of waking Bri from what was likely a fragile sleep, Cass slipped his phone back into his pocket and quickly finished eating. Just as he'd rinsed his plate and stuck it in the dishwasher, he heard quiet footsteps behind him.

Two strong arms wrapped around his waist, and he turned around, an immediate sense of relief spreading through him. He closed his eyes and let

out a slow breath, lowering his head to rest on Ash's shoulder.

"All set? Everything's good?" Ash asked softly.

"Mm-hmm." Cass nodded but didn't otherwise move. "Better now. Bri finally settled?"

"Yeah. She still thinks there's a monster in her closet."

"Mmm."

He felt Ash smile against him, and a kiss was pressed to his temple.

"You were over there a long time."

He nodded again and then forced himself to straighten up, grimacing slightly at the sore muscles in his arms. "Yeah, but I think Dan and I got everything set up so when Mom and Dad get here tomorrow, they won't have much to do to settle in."

Ash's eyes held a softness and understanding to them, and Cass just stood there for a few seconds, taking it in. The tension he'd been carrying much of the afternoon and evening slowly faded, and with a sigh, he shook his head and then captured Ash's mouth in a gentle kiss.

"I'm glad to be home," he said quietly when they parted.

Ash hummed a soft agreement and rubbed his hands up and down Cass's back again. Then he laughed lightly. "So, after the move, do you think Dan's still jealous?"

Cass grinned, which felt good, even though he was exhausted. He stepped back from Ash, took Ash's hand, and started leading them toward their bedroom. "Yes, but also no," he said, talking quietly as they passed the door to Bri's room. "He said he'd *love* to not have to worry about yard maintenance and all that, but he'd hate to give up the extra space. The condo is pretty tiny."

"Which is perfect for your parents," Ash added.

"Exactly." Cass pushed open the door to their bedroom, and Ash followed him in. "Dad will have less cleaning to do, and Mom says she's looking forward to the view of the mountains from their patio."

With a nod, Ash shut the door behind them. "And having her son close by again, I'm sure."

"It's only been a month," Cass whined, but he was smiling, too.

Ash rolled his eyes. "A whole month. During which time, you flew back down to Redding twice—"

"One time was to help them pack!" Cass argued. He slipped his arms around Ash and pulled him close as Ash grinned, laughing.

"Don't tell me you won't be relieved to have them so close by," he teased.

“Oh, I will. For sure.”

They kissed, and it was slow and sweet and tender, as though Ash knew exactly what Cass needed.

Despite the teasing and joking, Ash was one hundred percent right—Cass had been fretting the whole last month. After the school year had finished, Ash and Bri had moved from their one-bedroom apartment, where Ash had lived for several years, to a slightly bigger two-bedroom in Issaquah, only a couple of miles from the school where Ash had been hired to start as a kindergarten teacher, beginning in late August. Cass had come up to help with the move and had kind of just . . . stayed. In a half-planned sort of way.

Cass still had one year left in his degree program, though he’d lucked out big-time, landing a paid, part-time internship at the Issaquah Public Library. Since the job market was both saturated and competitive and he’d realized, thanks to Bri, how much he loved working with young children, he’d decided to pivot slightly and get his School Library Media endorsement as well. That required him to do additional fieldwork at a local area elementary school and obtain his teaching credential, a modification that his master’s program thankfully supported.

He’d started that last week—an extra several hours a week in the classroom on top of his internship, summer classes, moving, helping his parents move, and renovating his parents’ new condo to accommodate his mom’s wheelchair, all while still being with Ash and helping Ash take care of Bri.

He was exhausted.

But he loved it. Every single minute. Because every single minute felt like he was moving forward, in the direction he wanted to go, with the people who mattered most to him.

Ash’s hands slid down his chest, stopping low on his stomach, and Ash smiled into their kiss before pulling back. “Soooooo . . .”

Cass rolled his eyes but grinned, his heart fluttering. He shook his head. “Every night, huh? Can’t I just go to sleep? I’m exhausted.”

“It’s been three nights since last time,” Ash corrected, his smile turning crooked.

“Three blissfully quiet, sleep-filled nights,” Cass said. He tightened his arms around Ash, still grinning, and turned them around, pushing Ash back toward the bed. “What if I say yes? Then what?”

Before Ash could answer, Cass captured Ash’s mouth with another kiss—this one less innocent and gentle than the last. He continued backing Ash to

the bed, kissing him as they went. Heat rushed to his groin when Ash stopped as his legs hit the edge of the bed, and he pulled back, groaning as Ash's hips pressed into his.

"You'll love it. I promise. This one is black," Ash whispered roughly. One of his hands slipped back to cover Cass's and then guided Cass's hand lower, under the waistband of his sweatpants.

Cass groaned again as the tips of his fingers grazed over a thin, satiny material.

"And all you have to do is sit back and watch," Ash taunted, continuing to direct Cass's hand over the curve of his ass, which was not at all covered by whatever Ash was wearing this time.

"You know I can never just sit back and watch." Cass gripped the bare flesh under his palm and rocked his hips against Ash's.

"Ahhh . . ." Ash dropped his head to Cass's shoulder as he moaned, the sound sending another burst of heat through Cass. "I'm just . . . reminding you that that's . . . an option."

With a weak laugh, Cass slipped his other hand down under Ash's sweatpants, his heart racing as his fingers paused this time at the thin band of satin-covered elastic around Ash's waist. He swallowed hard and turned them around before collapsing onto the bed.

"Okay," he said, scooting back. "Show me."

Ash's smile brightened, but in some oddly seductive kind of way that immediately had Cass's heart stuttering. Then Ash stepped back, took a moment to partly dim the lights in the room, and slowly slipped off his T-shirt, letting it fall to the ground.

*Perfection,* Cass thought as his eyes raked over Ash's half-naked body.

Ash wasted no time, though he also somehow took his time—giving Cass a show as he undressed down to a skimpy, black-lace jockstrap Cass hadn't seen before. Ash swayed to a song that had to be just in his head, his eyes closed and a look of pure pleasure on his face as he touched himself slowly and sensually.

When Cass couldn't stand it anymore, he groaned and begged Ash to come closer.

Not more than a moment later, Ash was hovering above him, one hand wrapped around both of their swollen erections, pumping with a deliberate rhythm. Cass pushed his head back into his pillow, moaning Ash's name, and Ash kissed him again, swallowing the sound. He kept the pace slow to draw out their pleasure to the fullest, and after they both came, Ash collapsed on

top of Cass, breathing hard. Cass wrapped his arms around his boyfriend, dropping kisses in his hair and murmuring soft words of love and praise.

He could *feel* Ash's smile, even before Ash lifted his head up off Cass's chest, and he loved it. It was a smile he'd known, from the very moment they'd met, would be brilliant. A smile he'd known he'd needed to see.

Just as he did now.

Cass brought his hands up to frame Ash's face, his thumbs brushing along Ash's cheekbones.

"Mmm," Ash hummed, his eyes half closed and his expression soft. The corners of his lips twitched up more. "What?"

"I love you," Cass said quietly. "I love being here with you, like this."

Ash's smile deepened, and he drew himself forward until their lips met in a gentle, sweet kiss. "This might be my favorite spot," he said. When he spoke again, his voice trembled slightly. "After my parents and my sister . . ." Ash's smile faded, and he lowered his head back to Cass's chest. "I didn't think . . . There was a time when I didn't think I should have this—happiness and a future I looked forward to—because they couldn't have it, so why should I get to?"

Cass shook his head softly. "Ash . . ."

"Thank you for showing me I could love again," Ash said, lifting his head. His eyes were beautiful, soft, filled with hope and love and promise. "Thank you for loving me. I love you, too."

"Always."

They kissed again, and it was as beautiful and perfect as every kiss before it. The thought made Cass smile against Ash's lips.

With a soft laugh, Ash pulled back. "What?" he asked, his eyes amused.

Cass pursed his lips and shook his head. "Nothing. I'm just looking forward to kissing you again."

"Again? Now?"

"Mm-hmm. Now and tomorrow and every night."

Ash's cheeks turned pink. "I like that thought, too."

"I knew you would," Cass said, and he dipped back in for another kiss.

The end.

Find out what Ash, Cass, and Bri are up to ten years later. Download the Bonus Epilogue for FREE one my website here:
Fall Into Me Bonus Epilogue and other freebies!

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# Note From the Author

THANK YOU FOR READING *Fall Into Me*. I hope you found Ash and Cass's story heartwarming and healing. I actually had the idea to write this story nearly three years ago, around the tenth anniversary of my dad's passing, and some of the events early on in the story (as unlikely as they may seem) are loosely based on my own experiences. Several other things in the story, too, are based on memories I have of my dad. Thank you for reading it; it was healing for *me* to write, and I hope you felt the love I poured into every word.

For this book, I will be donating a portion of the proceeds to the American Heart Association (AHA; https://www.heart.org) in honor of my father, as well as Ash's sister and Cass's mother, who both experienced severe cardiac events. According to statistics and global data from the AHA[1], in the US, someone dies from cardiovascular disease every thirty-four seconds, totaling over 2,500 deaths *every day*. Additionally, someone dies from stroke every three minutes, fourteen seconds, resulting in nearly 450 deaths per day. The AHA's mission is to fight heart disease and stroke and help families and communities thrive; they heavily fund research, education, and health initiatives within the US as well as support survivors and families through a variety of other programs. Thank you for helping me support this important organization.

You can visit their website at https://www.heart.org for more information on AHA's mission or to find other ways you can help.

[1]Martin et al. 2024 heart disease and stroke statistics: a report of US and global data from the American Heart Association. *Circulation* 149(8);2024.

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Thank you also to my wonderful team of alpha readers. Without your help and encouragement and support, I'm sure I would have given up on getting this story written, especially when it got emotional and difficult.

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And thank you, as always, to my amazing family. I love you, and I appreciate every single moment we spend together.

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# About the Author

BECCA NEIL WRITES CONTEMPORARY romance, heavy on the hurt/comfort and angst but always with plenty of fluff and swoons and an uplifting happily-ever-after. She enjoys crafting character-centered stories of love and healing and forever. When she's not writing or thinking about writing, she might be off hiking somewhere or lost in the beauty of a sunset.

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