KJ Crawford

NEEDED *you*



Needed You

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For all who have loved, lost, and made it out of the crashing waves,
I hope you have found what you needed.
For those still fighting in the waves,
stand your ground.
Your rescue is coming.

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Preface

Please note that **Needed You** contains some difficult themes that include grief and loss and the pain associated with losing someone you love.

Needed You contains the following content warnings. Please read responsibly and remember that your mental health is what's most important.

DWI leading to loss of teenage life (off page)

Grief of family and friends

Frequent marijuana and alcohol use

References to underage drug and alcohol use (off page)

Parental abandonment over time

Fist fights

Minor physical assault/sexual harassment of a female side character

Reference to homophobic slurs (not the actual slur)

Mild somnophilia

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Chapter 1

Levon

"Okay, Mr. Richardson. Just a few more signatures."

The attorney, whose name I can't seem to remember, slides me another stack of papers with little red stickers that say *Sign Here*. I put the pen down and run a hand through my hair before picking the pen up again. It feels like I've signed my name about a hundred times already. It's hot in the small, unventilated conference room 2, and I can smell the stale air as it sits, unmoving and thick. Dust mites swirl around over the attorney's head, and I wonder if he notices them.

I clear my throat and move my chair closer to the table, my eyes shifting to find the first place I'm supposed to sign on the page. Not for the first time, a whirlwind of questions and uncertainties hit me. What am I doing here? Do I really have it in me to run a business? Why did I come back "home" to Glenrock, the small town in New York where I grew up, to take on a whole slew of heavy responsibilities when I had such a nice little life going for myself back in Sheltonville?

I glance at my uncle, who's sitting just to my right, and he gives me a gentle smile with a reassuring nod. Then I scribble my name on the papers, flipping through and making sure I sign and date each page, as instructed. My signature doesn't really even look like mine by the time we're done. I drop the pen on the table and lean back in my chair, pushing it onto its two back legs as I rub my sweaty palms on my denim-clad thighs. My eyes meet the attorney's, and he puts his glasses back on, resting them halfway down his nose. Then he takes his time, flipping through the stack of papers and checking that all the signatures are where they need to be.

After the final page, he looks up at my uncle with a decisive nod. "Everything is set, Mr. Davis," he says as he taps the stack of papers on the table to line them up neatly. He turns to me. "Congratulations, Mr. Richardson." The attorney stands and extends his hand. "You are now the owner of Glenrock Chrome and Tire."

I rise with him, my stomach feeling like it's twisting inside out. My uncle slaps me on the back with a hearty "Congratulations" as I take the attorney's hand in a firm handshake.

"Thank you, sir," I tell the attorney, and he gives me another nod.

And it's official and done.

I turn toward the door to exit the conference room, needing to get out of this stuffy space as quickly as possible. I feel my uncle behind me, so I keep moving, desperate to get out to my bike and get some fresh air into my lungs. I know my nerves will settle once I'm riding, the power of the bike underneath me. Nothing beats that feeling, really. It's been my escape since I was seventeen, when my parents finally gave in and let me get my first bike—a Honda Rebel 300. They weren't so keen on me riding because they were worried about safety, but seeing as how I grew up in a family that worked on, owned, rode, and sold motorcycles, it was an eventuality that they couldn't really fight.

Today in particular, I need to get on and ride to help me alleviate the jittery feeling that's been brewing in my chest since I entered the building. I just inherited my uncle's motorcycle shop; I'll be running the shop, the store, and the building, and this place that I grew up in, this place that means so much to me, will now be *my* responsibility. I always knew it was going to happen, but the fact that it's now mine is surreal. Just because it's a good thing doesn't mean I'm not scared.

When we get outside of the stifling building and into fresh air, my uncle catches up to me. “Well, Lev. It’s yours.” He smiles at me warmly and claps me on the shoulder.

“I can’t believe it,” I admit as I pull my keys out of my pocket and give him a tight smile.

We make our way to my motorcycle, which is parked right in front of his car, and he continues. “I’m so proud of you. You’ve come so far and done well for yourself. You’re stronger than you think, and this is just another step forward for you. And I don’t want you to worry,” he adds, giving me a stern but knowing look. “You know I’ll be around to help. I can’t stay home with Aunt Tracy every day. She’ll likely kick me out if I do that.” The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes show when he smiles. “Besides, bum knee or not, you know I can’t really stay away.”

We both chuckle. “Thank you, Uncle John. I’m—”

He puts his hand on my shoulder. “You’ll be fine.” He squeezes as I stare at my feet. “I’m completely confident in you or I wouldn’t have left my baby in your hands. And like I said, I’ll be around to help. I’m sure you’ll find your footing quickly.”

“I appreciate it. I just don’t want to disappoint—”

“You won’t,” he cuts in. “Now, go enjoy your weekend, and I’ll see you bright and early on Monday to make sure you have everything you need and know what’s going on with our customers. You’re not getting rid of me so quickly. See you then, kid.”

He turns and unlocks his car, then opens the driver’s side door and climbs in as I grab my helmet and throw my leg over the seat of my bike. I start the engine, letting the deep vibration calm my anxieties. Then I rev it and wave to my uncle as I leave the parking lot.

I cruise down the road on autopilot, quickly losing myself and letting my mind float back to the events of the last few hours. I just signed the papers and got the deed to my uncle’s motorcycle shop. I now officially own a business, and despite my uncle’s reassurances a few minutes ago, I’m scared as hell.

It’s not that I don’t have the experience or don’t know what I’m doing. But I know how important the shop is—to my uncle, to my family, and to the community—and that responsibility is heavy.

This has always been Uncle John’s plan, for me to take over. He’s been preparing me for it since I was old enough to walk. At first, it was simple

things, like letting me hand him the tools or polishing the chrome on the bikes he was working on. Then, as I got older, he taught me how to do more complicated things, like repairs and maintenance, and it just called to me. I started finding every opportunity I could to tinker with motors and mess around with broken parts on cars and lawn mowers and small machines to try and get them running again. But motorcycles were always what called to me the most.

Even the whole last six years I spent working as a mechanic in Sheltonville, I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd come back and take over. I just can't believe that time has actually come.

My mind starts to race as the thoughts flash through it, my inner monologue questioning what the future will be like and whether I'm ready to carry the legacy forward. Uncle John is a well-respected member of the community, and everyone in Glenrock knows that he'll treat them fairly and take good care of their motorcycles. It's my job now to make sure that reputation he's built continues with me in charge.

Before I work myself into a panic, I force myself to focus back to the power of my motorcycle beneath me. It's like a drug. My breathing slows, and my body relaxes, soothed by the comforting hum and vibration of the engine. The power the motorcycle holds and the fact that I'm the one in control of that power are exhilarating. It's so different from driving a car. It makes me feel alive.

I turn onto the tree-lined street that leads toward the neighborhood where I grew up, and nostalgia instantly sets in as I notice all the little things that I probably never really noticed before. Like how well-kept the houses are, and how, even in the midsized town that Glenrock is, home to probably less than ten thousand people, everything feels close-knit, like a real, true community.

I've been back a few times since I left. But it's been a while—months or a year, maybe. And it's different when it's just a visit.

Now, it's like I'm really coming home.

I remember all the moments that meant so much to me growing up. Riding my bike and skateboard down these streets, playing with the neighborhood kids and feeling safe and secure. I didn't have concerns or worries. My parents helped to support me no matter what I was doing or how I was getting to the endpoint. I always felt welcome and loved in their home, and I'm so grateful for that.

Sometimes I beat myself up for not being able to lean into that peace and comfort when Nate died. Instead, I convinced myself I was part of the reason he died. Because of that, I needed to get out of here as soon as I could. I needed to get away from the ghosts.

So I did. I left when I was eighteen, just a week after I graduated from high school. I took off with Tyler, a friend from school. He met a girl online and was moving to Sheltonville, a smaller town about two hours southwest of Glenrock. It didn't take much for him to convince me to go with him. It was perfect timing and the right opportunity to get away, and honestly, I was so deep into drinking and smoking pot and generally being a stupid, reckless kid. If I stayed, there was a good chance I'd have ended up just like my best friend.

That thought sobers me as I pull up into my parents' driveway, and I park my bike and sit there for another moment, reflecting.

Sheltonville was more than just a memory. It was where I found myself again. I spent a long time adjusting, trying to manage my emotions and find a way to move forward with all the intrusive thoughts constantly bombarding me. I worked—a lot—at the main motorcycle shop in Sheltonville, and I made a few more friends, mostly guys who were either mechanics or connected to the shop there. And I loved the work. It reminded me of my passion for bikes and that I could have joy in life again, even with the devastating loss of my best friend.

Things were just evening out for me when my uncle called and let me know that he was ready to sell me the shop, and now was the time to come home if I wanted it. Two weeks later, I packed up my small apartment in Sheltonville, said goodbye to my friends there, ended things with the man I was casually dating, and came back here to Glenrock, the place I used to call home.

I look up at the house, guilt weighing me down again. I could have visited more. I should have. But it always hurt too much, coming back here.

Now, I really want to feel like I belong again, that this is where I'm going to put roots down. But there's a knot in my stomach that makes me question whether I'll be able to.

I get off my motorcycle, hang my helmet on the handle, and adjust my T-shirt. Then I start up the walkway toward the front door.

My mom invited me over for dinner tonight because I'm sure she knows I don't have the kitchen stuff in my apartment unpacked yet. Or maybe she

just wanted to see me again, even though it's only been four days since I got back to town. Whatever the reason, I'm looking forward to a home-cooked meal with my family.

As I approach the door, a feeling of contentment wraps around me. I'm so ready to settle in and enjoy a stress-free night and let my parents spoil me a bit while I secretly enjoy it.

I knock twice on the wooden door before turning the handle and letting myself in. The scent of my mom's amazing cooking attacks my nostrils—garlic and herbs and something rich, like chicken, maybe. My stomach growls in anticipation.

I round the corner into the kitchen and see my mom stirring the contents of a pot on the stove. "Hey, Mom," I greet with a grin, and she turns around, startled.

"Goodness, Levon! You scared me," she says, grabbing the towel off her shoulder to wipe her hands. She swishes the towel toward me as if she wants to snap me with it, but then she gives me a kind smile and closes the distance between us instead, her arms open.

I lean down and give her a hug, planting a kiss on her cheek.

"How did it go?" she asks, releasing me and turning back to the stove.

I grab a carrot stick from a platter on the counter and munch down as I rest up against the island in the middle of the kitchen. "It was wild," I tell her. She doesn't need to know how worried I actually am about taking over the business. "Sort of surreal. I still can't believe it's mine."

She chuckles and shoos me away as she sets the pot on a trivet on the island. Then she pauses and looks up at me, her smile softening.

"My boy," she says, her eyes carrying that tired but caring sparkle only a mother's eyes can. She sees right through the tough façade I'm wearing, and I probably shouldn't be surprised. I put up those walls quickly, but she knows. She knows what happened when I was sixteen and how much it's affected me, even if I've been trying to hide it. "I know it's not easy being back. But give it time. You'll adjust, and I'm sure being here won't be this hard forever."

The reference to my reason for leaving town six years ago stings, and she seems to know it. She rubs my arm soothingly and then turns back to the cabinets. Reaching up onto her tiptoes, she takes a stack of plates off the top shelf. She hands me four of them. "Here, go set the table, please."

With a nod, I take the plates from her and head to the dining room, replaying what she said in my head.

"I'm sure being here won't be this hard forever . . ."

A sharpness stings my chest, and I close my eyes for a second. She'd better be right, or I might not survive.

When I left Glenrock to move to Sheltonville, I had no choice. I had to escape from this town and everything that happened. On top of that, I was making bad choices, getting myself into trouble, and it was only a matter of time before things were going to catch up with me. I was hurting, aching, out of my mind with guilt and grief. Leaving really was my only option. I needed to remove myself from all the reminders of Nate and get my head on straight.

And I did, I think. So now I can start the life I always wanted back here in my hometown with my family. Even if it's hard, I'm more mature now. I can do this.

I set the plates at everyone's spots at the table and then place a napkin and set of silverware next to each plate. Just as I finish the last place setting, my sister comes barreling down the stairs. She swings off the railing, and her body crashes into me, slamming a chair into the table and causing the silverware to rattle.

"Jesus, Linds," I say with a laugh as I wrap my arms around her.

Lindsey jumps up and down in my arms. "Hi," she squeals, squeezing me tight before pulling away and then coming back in to give me another quick hug. "I'm so glad you're home, Lev! I missed you so much." She jumps up and down again as she heads to the kitchen. A moment later, she returns with a heaping bowl of mashed potatoes, which she sets on the table.

My heart warms inside my chest as I watch her. Lindsey has a light about her that just seems to brighten everything around her. She graduated from high school three years ago and has been living with my parents to save money for a backpacking trip to Europe she's been planning with her best friend for as long as I can remember. Like most parents would be, our mom is beside herself with worry, but I know my sister. She's strong-willed and bold, and she'll be fine.

My mom joins us, bringing more platters of food, and then the three of us take our seats around the table just as my dad comes in from the kitchen, likely after washing his hands from being outside tinkering around with

something in the backyard. He gives my mom a kiss on the cheek and squeezes her shoulder before he sits as well.

Then we take turns spooning food onto our plates. My mom and Lindsey chat away about Lindsey's breakfast and lunch shifts at the local diner where she works, Lindsey animatedly filling our mom in on all the gossip she heard, and my dad and I make small talk about the shop.

"So, everything went well today?" my dad asks. "Any issues?"

I swallow the bite I just put into my mouth. "It was good. Fine." Nervousness starts to ripple in my stomach again. "No issues, really. Of course Uncle John was there. I signed a lot of papers," I tell him with a laugh. "I was nervous. I still am, but I have a lot of ideas. I'd love to put my personal touches in the shop a little but keep it appealing to the current customers, you know?"

"Makes sense. You want to keep the loyal customers but also open it to bring in new customers. Maybe some younger ones," he says.

I nod. "I think I'll give it a little time and get my feet under me, then see what I can do."

"That's smart." He points his fork at me. "You'll do fine, Lev. I have no doubt about that. You're ready, and your uncle wouldn't have given you the place if he didn't think so." With a warm smile, he adds, "And we'll all be around to help you if you need it."

His encouragement is nothing new. He's always been supportive of me and anything I've wanted to do or try throughout my life. When Lindsey and I were younger, we could bring pretty much any idea to him, and he'd work with us to try to make it happen, whether it be a project or trying a new sport. My mom was the same; she loved when we wanted her help in the kitchen, trying out new recipes. Still, his words right now give me even more of a sense of belonging, and I cling to it.

"I know, Dad. I appreciate that," I say, returning his smile.

After dinner, Lindsey and I help clear the table and do the dishes before we head outside to sit around the fire pit on our back patio. I decided to stay here tonight in my old room instead of going to my apartment since I knew I wanted to hang out with my sister. My parents have no shame in sharing with me how happy they are about that.

When our parents say good night and retire to their room, Lindsey and I stay outside by the fire, talking and filling each other in on what's happened over the last few months. My sister explains that she's still working two

jobs, stashing away her money for her trip. She works days at the diner and nights at a high-end restaurant closer to the center of town. The money's good, I guess, and since most of her friends have gone away to school, she likes keeping herself busy.

"So, Kayla and Jenna and Ericka all traveled around to different places after graduation and are back now. Kayla and Jenna went to Mexico, and Ericka went to Japan. The group that all hung out right out of high school—Mallory, Beth, Lizbel, Jeff—they all went off to college. Hannah is married, and I think she's having a baby soon. Luke and Tim both hooked up with Kayla at one point last year. I think she's actually with Tim now, but she doesn't really talk about it much. Do you remember Max? He's at the diner with me. He's one of the cooks." She's talking so fast and rattling off so many names that it's making my head spin.

I can only nod. "Linds, you know I really don't know who many of these people are, right?" I chuckle.

"Ugh, I know." She huffs and leans her head on the back of the chair. "It's because you've been gone a long time! I'm really glad you're back." She smiles at me, and even though my heart warms at her words, I know what's coming.

It's been months since she's given me an update, and I'm antsy as hell as she stares into the fire, keeping her gaze away from me. Lindsey starts bouncing her knee and finally breaks first, somehow blurting out the words in a whisper that's almost too quiet to hear.

"He came into the diner a few days ago."

My head snaps up to find Lindsey's eyes, but she's still staring at the fire. My stomach clenches, waiting for her to say more, so I stay quiet, though I'm not sure I'd be able to get any words out anyway.

She shrugs. "He looks okay, I guess. Maybe a little tired? He just got coffee to go, but . . . I hadn't seen him for a while before that." She finally looks at me. "Are you doing okay being back? With, you know . . . everything?"

I take a deep breath and sigh. She's asking like I'm some fragile thing, like she's scared I'll fall right back into being the person I was in those two shitty years after Nate died. "I haven't really thought much about it," I lie. I've thought a *lot* about it.

"Look," she says, turning in her chair to give me her "don't bullshit me" face. "You're back now, and you *know* they're here. Nate's family,

specifically Dare. Yeah, I know you considered everything when you were making the decision to move back. But there's a huge difference between theoretically being back and *actually* being back. You're going to have to be okay with seeing them from time to time, more than that, even. It's a small town, Lev. You're eventually gonna have to face all your ghosts."

Leave it to my sister to lay it out for me, saying the quiet parts out loud. But all of that—everything she just said—I've already thought about it countless times. Lindsey and Dare had just started high school when the accident happened, and they were sophomores when I moved. She kept me updated, though, because she knew I still cared, even if it wasn't easy to hear how much Dare struggled. But I felt like I needed to hear it. It was a little bit of a sick way for me to punish myself for running away from my grief and guilt and responsibilities.

Lindsey gives my shoulder a gentle nudge. "Don't spiral."

"I'm fine, really. It's just . . . I'm not sure I'm ready to face them. I can't see Dare. Not yet." I feel tears prickling behind my eyes, and I swallow hard. You'd think after eight years, it would be easier—that I wouldn't want to puke or cry or rage at the unfairness of the situation every time I think of Nate. He was my best friend, and the night that everything changed, my world came crashing down around me. And god, poor Dare. He was just freshly thirteen years old. He lost himself that night when he lost his brother. From what I understand, he hasn't been able to find himself fully again since.

That's my fault too. Any struggles he had to suffer through were my fault, and I can't forgive myself for that. I should have been there to stop what happened. I was Nate's best friend. His other person. I was the responsible one. I should have been there to take Nate's keys and keep him in the house. If I'd been there that night, I'd still have my best friend. Nathan Archer would still be alive, Dare would still have a brother, and his family and my life would not have been left in shambles.

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Chapter 2

Darian

I close my laptop after my client meeting and stand up to stretch. A yawn escapes me, and I lean into it, pushing my breath out loudly. It's too fucking early for this. I like being able to make my own hours as an independent contractor, but this potential client is a big one, and when they insisted on an early morning meeting, I agreed, even if I knew I'd regret it later. I'm glad I agreed, though. They want me to work on a rebrand of their business to make it more modern and appealing. It's the kind of project I love to dive into and use my creativity. Landing this client would also be killer for my portfolio. But more importantly, it'd make the money in my bank account money *I* earned, not money my parents gave me. And the satisfaction of knowing that is worth more than a couple extra hours of sleep.

Working as an independent contractor is not for the faint of heart, and I do appreciate having a cushion to fall back on if work dries up. But what I really want, even if I know I can't have it, is for things with my parents to be how they used to be, before all the shit hit the fan.

I want family vacations, lots of gifts at Christmas, dinner together on a regular basis, hugs and physical connection. And movies and board games

and video games. I want what Nate and I had growing up. A family that's there and that cares.

But I haven't had that since Nate died. My parents did their disappearing act, gave me an account with a large sum of money in it, and then sort of moved on. Maybe the money helped them feel less guilty about not being there. But it hasn't really helped me.

Sure, it got me through school, and when I turned twenty-one and my dad passed the responsibility to me to manage it, I used a good chunk to add an attached bathroom to my bedroom, upgrade my office space, and buy the best tablet and computer I could for work. The rest is just sitting in the account.

I have plans for it, maybe. I've been thinking about buying a house—more specifically, this house. But I haven't brought that up to them yet. I know I should. After all, they don't really live here anymore, even if it's still technically their house. That's something I need to plan for, though. And not something to think about when I'm not caffeinated.

With a deep sigh, I head downstairs into the kitchen to get coffee started. I'm gonna need it to force myself to get through the day. I can't seem to get out of this vicious loop I'm in, waking up late, doing some work, and then escaping one way or another—smoking pot, drinking, or getting laid—before crashing back in bed and having it start all over again. I'm lucky that I like my job because it's the only thing outside of getting high and hooking up that makes me feel anything. Part of me died the day Nate did, and I've had a hard time coming back from that.

I force myself to eat a granola bar while the coffee brews, and I find myself staring at the empty living room. I bet there's a shit ton of dust in there, and I know my mom would bitch about it . . . if she ever bothered to use it again. But the house is empty and quiet, as it always is now. It's been this way for the last eight years, really. Neither of my parents can stand to be here, like they need to avoid the gloom that's settled over the house, so I'm left here alone.

My mom is always gone on some retreat or self-healing seminar, and I never know when she's going to be home or when she's going to be gone. And my dad . . . well, he just works all the time. It didn't start immediately, but looking back on it, I can see the progression more clearly now. He started staying longer and longer at the office, working more hours, working weekends. Then, he started missing family dinners. Eventually he just took to sleeping at his office. He'd text or call me occasionally to check in. Both of them slowly pulled away further and further, until I felt completely

abandoned and alone. By Nate's one-year deathiversary, I realized I didn't just lose my brother. I lost my parents, too.

It hurt so much, especially when I was also still grieving and needed them to help me through it. I needed therapy and support, warm hugs, some basic acknowledgement that I was young and didn't know how to cope with the loss. But they gave me none of that, and they basically disappeared from my life and left me to fend for myself.

I let out a frustrated sigh and then take my coffee upstairs, passing by the closed door to Nate's room on my way to my own bedroom. I set my mug down on the corner of my desk and plop into the chair. As I stare out the window into the backyard, where the pool sits unused, its cover littered with the first of the fall leaves, I wonder for the hundredth time if I put my desk here to torture myself with the sight. I know it's definitely the reason I haven't tried to get an apartment of my own all these years. It's sick and twisted, probably, but I need it.

That pool—that's where Nate and his friends would hang out every day in the summer, swimming or goofing off. I have so many memories here and with this house, and I just can't see giving them up.

I close my eyes and let myself go for a moment. Back to those summers and back to when my older brother was still alive. I looked up to him and his friends so much. The Wolf Pack, they called themselves. Lev, Chris, Caleb, Nolan, Garrett, and my brother, Nate. I so desperately wanted to be like him, to hang out with them, to be one of the Pack. But being three years younger made for a big gap in maturity. Nate was usually nice and would let me hang with them off and on, or at least until the booze and weed came out. Then he'd send me away, like he was protecting me from that part of his life.

I idolized him and the Pack, but Nate's best friend, Lev, was always my favorite. He always treated me like I was a friend, was never condescending, and stuck up for me when Nate was being an ass. He truly was Nate's other half, and I really don't remember a time when Lev wasn't around. He was also a good-looking dude. Very good-looking. I may or may not have had a crush on him back in the day.

But I haven't seen him for a long time. Not since he turned tail and left us all in the dust—left *me*—like he'd never cared at all. Yeah, I know he struggled to even finish high school, getting drunk and high and whatever he had to do to numb the pain. Once he graduated, he couldn't get out of town fast enough. Moved to Sheltonville because he blamed himself for Nate's death or some shit. I don't know how he doesn't understand that what

happened to Nate that night and leading up to it was my brother's own stupid doing. He chose to get shit-faced. He chose to get in the car after the party. His actions caused him to wrap his car around a tree. He was a selfish fucking asshole for the decision he made, and I'm still pissed at him for it.

It changed everything.

It changed how everyone looks at me, how they treat me. Even to this day, Caleb—who was the wildest of the whole Pack if you ask me—is subdued and different around me. Every time he sees me, there's guilt written all over his face, which sort of makes sense, at least, since his house was where they were all hanging out and getting messed up the night Nate died.

But that's where I get angry again. No one needs to feel sorry for me. *No one*. Nate did something stupid, and it changed all of our lives. *Nate* did it. Not anyone else. I'm not a charity case, and I hate when people treat me like that.

Needing a distraction from the direction my thoughts are going, I pull out my phone and open up my texting app to send a quick message to my friend Ryan.

Me: Hey. What's up for tonight?

I wait a few minutes, and he texts back.

Ryan: Party at Katie's.

Me: Ha. You'll be getting some then.

Ryan: Shut up. But yeah. I hear there may be something there for you, too.

Me: Not interested.

Ryan: Mmmmm. You're due to have some action. Loosen up, baby.

Me: Fuck you.

Ryan: Nah, no thanks. I'll be busy with Katie but . . . thanks?



Setting my phone back on the side table, I sigh. I really don't want to go out, but I'll make myself for a little while. If nothing else, I'll get a little fucked up and come home to maybe get some sleep. Fuck knows I could use a good night's sleep.

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I work through the afternoon, grab a quick dinner, and actually manage to take a nap. By nine that night, I'm walking up to Katie's house, reminded of why I hate parties like this. I'm dressed like I belong here, though, with my tight, ripped black jeans, a black leather jacket, chains hanging off my belt, and a lip ring that always gets me more attention than it should.

The loud music booming through the windows and door, the vibration of the bass when I turn the handle and step inside, the way the house smells like sweat, weed, and beer—it's all too fucking much, even for me. Too many people are crammed into the living room, where the furniture's all pushed aside to make space for a dance floor. Girls are grinding up on guys who look like they never miss a day at the gym and maybe work with three brain cells. Some couples are making out in the corners of the room, and conversations are happening all around. The music's deep bass and shouts of voices from every direction make me shake my head to try to block out some of the noise. The sooner I socialize, the sooner I can get out of here and go home.

I walk into the kitchen to get myself a drink and look for Ryan, passing around people, excusing myself, and gently pushing bodies out of the way to make a path. As I enter, I see Ryan with his arm draped around Katie, beautiful in her white corset, skin-tight jeans, and heels. Ryan is completely and totally gone for her, and that's good, because she's pretty cool.

I walk to the counter, grab a red plastic cup, and fill it with what's probably a dangerous mixture of several types of alcohol they have sitting out. Then I move across the room to join Ryan and Katie.

Katie gives me a hug in greeting. "Hi, Dare!" she says, smiling brightly. "What are you drinking?"

I look into the cup. "I just mixed a bunch of shit together," I tell her, taking a sip that burns all the way down. I push Ryan's shoulder. "What's up,

asshole?”

Ryan and I met shortly after Nate died in our sophomore year of high school, and he came into my life like a wrecking ball. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Ryan was there, the new kid in school, and we were drawn to each other. Our friendship started with our hatred of gym class, which we both had sixth period, and we’ve just gotten closer as the years have gone by. He knows pretty much everything about Nate and my parents and the night Nate died. He stuck with me through the worst of my grief, and I’ll never be able to make that up to him. I’m just glad our paths crossed and that skipping sixth-period gym more than we ever should have brought us to this point.

He laughs, and we hang out there talking until the kitchen starts to get too full for me.

“I’m going to go into the other room to get some air,” I say, and he gives me a nod, then asks Katie if she wants another drink. I turn and head out of the kitchen, wandering around the much-too-crowded house until I find a quieter room. It looks a bit like an office, and I sink down into an oversized leather chair in one corner. There are only a few people in the room, and the music isn’t as loud. I dig into my pocket for my joint and lighter, then I bring the joint to my lips and light it up, taking a deep inhale and letting the smoke fill my lungs. A few minutes later, I feel hands on my shoulders from behind, and the soft scent of floral perfume wafts around me.

“Hey, Dare,” a voice whispers in my ear. Hands trail around my chest as Katie’s best friend, Jenna, walks in front of me. “Will you share?” she asks, straddling my hips on the chair. I shift slightly to get us more comfortable, and she sits down on my thighs. *Okay, so we’re doing this?*

Katie has tried to set me up with Jenna a few times now, and it’s not that I’m opposed to it, but I’m also not overly interested. I’ve hooked up with her once or twice on a mutual understanding that it was for fun with no strings, but I never want it to feel like I’m using her for sex. I’ve had sex with both girls and guys to satisfy a need to get off, although I prefer men, if I’m being honest. I’m cool going either way, really; I just like being close to people. I like holding and touching and feeling other people’s body heat. And with Jenna, I’m okay letting her do what she wants for a little while. It’ll make me feel something, at least. But I won’t let it go further than that tonight.

“Hey, Jenna,” I greet her as she takes a puff of my joint and then puts it back between my lips.

She leans forward and kisses the side of my mouth. “I’m glad I saw you come in here.” Her hands move to my shoulders, and she grinds herself

against me.

I sigh and lean my head back as she starts kissing my neck. I put my hands on her thighs and squeeze, and I let her suck and lick my neck. It feels good, and I fall into the sensation, rocking slightly up into her. I'm so fucking starving for touch that I'll basically let her do anything to me right now. I don't even really want it to be sexual. I just want to feel her body and hands on me. But she's in it, and the more she kisses and grinds on me, the more it feels good. My dick is slowly waking up, and it'll be disappointed when it realizes nothing's going to happen.

Her hand reaches under my shirt, and her soft, warm palms rub up my torso. She moves her face to try to kiss my lips, but I turn my head away, and her lips make contact with my jaw instead. I don't want to kiss her, and I really don't want to mislead her and have this turn into more. When I feel her hand move down toward my belt, her teeth nipping my earlobe, I take her wrist in one hand and gently push her back with my other.

"Okay, okay," I say. She groans and tries to come back to kiss me again, grinding her core against my groin. I give her a chaste peck on the lips. "Come on, Jenna . . . not . . ." I start to stand up, which forces her off of me. "I'm sorry, Jenna," I apologize. "Not tonight."

With a huff, she straightens out her shirt, then gives me a coy look. "Want to just smoke and snuggle? Maybe it'll lead to something else?" She walks her fingers up my chest.

YES. "Nah, I'm good. Maybe another time. Just not in the mood tonight."

She makes a pouty face and kisses me on the cheek before she turns to leave. "Maybe I'll see you later," she says over her shoulder.

I smile and give her a wave, sneaking a glance at her from behind as she walks out of the room. What the fuck is wrong with me? I run a hand down my face and decide it's time for me to go, too. I'm not sure why I even stayed this long.

I can't find Ryan and Katie anywhere, so I send Ryan a quick text and then head out. When I get home, I strip down to my boxers and crawl into bed, pulling the covers up over my head. I'd give anything right now to just have a big, warm, hard body against mine, but I fall into a fitful sleep, alone and frustrated.

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Chapter 3

Levon

My new apartment in town is starting to feel more like home, but it still needs some work for me to really settle in. It's small—just one bedroom, a bathroom that's almost as big, a living area, and a kitchen with a bar and nook big enough for a little table—but it's clean and modern and exactly what I need.

Lindsey's here to help me put her touch on it. According to her, it needs *something*, and she doesn't trust me to make decorating decisions. I told her she could do whatever she wanted, so she brought over some navy, gray, and white curtains and a matching navy-blue rug for the floor. I guess she thought I needed to do everything in navy blue. I'm not a huge fan of the curtains, but she claims block color is in, so I begrudgingly let her have the honors. And truthfully, I really don't care enough to fight her on it.

As she's hanging the curtains in my bedroom, standing on a chair so she can reach, she glances at me and chuckles. "You would think that—"

"Don't say it," I interrupt, knowing exactly where she's going with her train of thought. She's so predictable. She laughs again, but I double down.

“You will *not* put me in a stereotype or assumed norm. When has that ever worked out for *anyone*?”

She jumps off the chair, still laughing. “I’m just saying that it would be nice if you had a *little* bit of David Bromstad in your blood. Besides, he’s nice to look at.” She winks and gives her shoulders a little shimmy.

I shake my head. “I mean, I’d be okay with a little of David Bromstad *in* me. And you know he’d be coming home with me.” I point a finger to my chest and wiggle my eyebrows, smiling at her the entire time.

She pushes her bottom lip out in a pout. “Ew,” she says, but then she giggles. “I know. It’s not fair. So many hotties, and you all like dick.”

“Watch your mouth! You like dick, too!” I retort, still grinning. Her mouth opens and closes like a fish. “Did I render my sister speechless?” I feign shock as I take the plastic packaging that was holding the curtains from her and head into the kitchen to throw it away. She follows me out of the bedroom, chuckling.

Together, we finish up with the curtains, and I break down the rest of the boxes, stacking them by the door to take to the trash later. I grab two bottles of water out of the fridge and hand her one. She takes a big drink as she sits down at the kitchen table.

“So, Katie Montgomery had a party on Friday night. Do you remember her?”

I search my brain for a face, but I can’t place her. “Nope,” I reply.

“She’s dating Ryan Michaels. Dare’s best friend.”

His name is familiar, but I still can’t place anything about him, either. Shit, I *have* been gone for a long time. I just look at her, inviting her to continue.

“Anyway, Darian was there.”

The name slams into me, causing my stomach to tighten. I take a breath and stare at the label on my water bottle. My thumb starts playing with the corner that has detached from the bottle. Lindsey continues.

“Sophie said that he was pretty wrecked, and Jenna, another girl, was all kissing up on him, but he left the party alone.”

Something rolls through me, and I can’t figure out what it is exactly. Of course Dare would be at a party on a Friday night. Of course he would be hooking up with someone.

“Sounds like he’s making something work for himself here,” I say, my voice tight. “Good for him.”

Lindsey sighs. “You’re going to see him eventually, Lev.”

“I’m well aware,” I reply coldly. I can tell from the expression on her face that a lecture is coming, the same lecture that always comes after any conversation we’ve had about Nate’s accident in the past six years. Lindsey hates when I blame myself for Nate’s death and tries to remind me every chance she can that I’m not to blame. It never helps.

“Lev, my god, when will you realize that it wasn’t your fault!?” She throws her hands in the air with an exasperated sigh. I stare at her but don’t respond. “You have to stop blaming yourself. *You* didn’t get behind the wheel. *You* didn’t make a poor decision to try to drive. *You* didn’t get Nate all fucked up and throw him the keys. It hurts us all to know how much guilt you have over this. It wasn’t your fault!” Her hand reaches out to grasp mine. She gives it a squeeze.

I quickly pull my hand away. “I don’t want to talk about it,” I say, trying to keep the emotion out of my voice. “I may not have done any of that, but that’s the problem. I didn’t do *anything*.”

“You weren’t even there!” she exclaims, throwing her head back in frustration. “You were at another party! How could you—”

“Exactly,” I cut in. “I wasn’t there. I don’t want to talk about it, Lindsey. Please.” My stomach is churning, and I swallow deeply.

She sighs and aggressively sets her water bottle on the table. “You’re back, Levon. People are here. Nate’s family is *here*. *You* came back to *us*. You *will* see them. I wish you would just realize that it wasn’t your fault so you can start to live in peace!”

I send her a glare and meet her eyes. “This conversation is done.”

She groans and tosses her bottle at me. “You’re a mess, Lev. I just wish you could let some of it go. It’s bringing you down.” She sighs deeply, as if she’s punctuating her point, and she pauses as she seems to study me for a minute. Her gaze is intense, boring into me, and I look away quickly.

I don’t need her to see just how much I’m not okay, and I also don’t need the conversation to continue the way it has. It feels like every time we talk lately, it goes back to this. My family tries to tell me to let go of the guilt, and I know I’ll never be able to do that. I’m about to change the subject to just about anything else when she beats me to it.

“Oh! I wanted to ask you about that guy from Sheltonville.” I glance up at her, and her voice softens as she says, “How did you guys leave it?”

“Seth?” I ask, and she nods. “I broke it off. It was casual anyway.”

I met Seth about a week after moving to Sheltonville. I was a mess, and he was the calm to my storm. I kept it casual but definitely used him to numb some of the pain—or just to *feel* something.

She sighs. “How’d he take it?”

“He wasn’t happy, but he got why. We both knew it wasn’t going anywhere. He was looking for some fun and companionship, and it was perfect for us. I mean, I’m a few hours away now, and casual hookups don’t mean much, you know? And I’m definitely not driving several hours for it.” I run a hand through my hair and try to redirect the conversation again. “And what about you? You seeing anyone?”

She wrinkles her nose. “Nah. Not really.” I raise an eyebrow. “I was sort of seeing this guy Matt for a few weeks, but I wasn’t feeling it, so I just stopped.”

I laugh. “Away foul peasant,” I joke.

“It wasn’t like that,” she scoffs. I shoot her a look, calling her on her bullshit. “Well, maybe it was.” She scrunches her face. “So you’re meeting Uncle John at the garage tomorrow?” she asks, changing the subject completely.

“Yeah, and on that note, I’m kicking your ass out. It’s late.”

Lindsey gets up from the table, picks up the water bottle she threw at me earlier, and tosses it into the recycle bin. “Yeah, I have to be at work at five for the breakfast shift tomorrow, so I should get going anyway.” She gives me a quick hug and then heads out the door.

And I’m alone again.

I lock the door behind her and turn down the hallway to my bedroom. Five minutes later, I’m crawling under my new comforter and sheets. Navy, to match the curtains and rug, of course. I settle in and take out my phone.

I haven’t really been following Dare’s socials since I left, but I haven’t needed to, since Lindsey’s been keeping me up-to-date. She’s the little town gossip, and she’s kept me just as attached as I wanted to be. Now that I’m back, though, and, as she keeps reminding me, I’m going to run into him eventually, I guess it wouldn’t hurt to check up on him myself and see what he’s doing.

I tap on the Instagram icon on my phone and search his name. A logo for freelance graphic design comes up, along with a little blurb and several albums showing off his work. It looks good. He’s talented.

He’s got a separate personal account, and I click on that, then scroll more until I find some pictures of him from what I would guess was this summer, out by the pool at his house and the fire pit in his backyard. His style is dark. Everything in black and burgundy and deep purple. He has his hair longer than I remember, and is that a lip ring?

I stretch the picture with my fingers so I can zoom in on his lips. They’re plump and the perfect shade of pink, and yeah. That’s a lip ring. My cock stirs as I stare at the photo. *God, that’s hot.* My cock twitches again, and I lay my phone down and squeeze my temples.

I need to stop. It’s Darian. Darian Archer. Nate’s little brother. Nate’s very adult, very grown, very good-looking little brother.

Fuck.

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Chapter 4

Darian

I hate Mondays as much as I hate every other day of the week, but thankfully, the day goes by quickly, filled with work and emails and too much coffee. By the time I'm finished, it's later than I expected. My fridge is empty, and I'm one hundred percent not up for a trip to the grocery store. So instead, I grab my ratty black sweater, the most comfortable one I own, and head out to the diner to get something to eat.

The diner is a staple in our town. It's the place where people go any hour of the day and can pretty much get whatever they want. The food is good, and they've managed to stay affordable. It is slightly run-down, but part of that is where its appeal comes from. The old wood paneling and red carpet just add to the charm.

As I enter the building, my nose is filled with the scent of fried food and coffee. The clanking of dishes and silverware warms something inside of me, sending a familiar feeling all the way to my bones. Another reason I like to come here.

I scan the tables and the bar seating area. At the far side of the diner, Katie and Ryan are sitting in a booth with food in front of them. Ryan catches my eye and smiles, waving me over.

“Hey, man,” he says as I approach their table.

“Hey. I don’t want to intrude,” I say, motioning between the two of them.

“Oh my god, Dare. It’s fine. Sit. Ryan and I see too much of each other anyway!” Katie smiles at me and scoots over, patting the ragged vinyl burgundy booth seat beside her.

With a sheepish grin, I slide in the booth. There’s a discarded straw paper sitting on the table, and I pick it up and start folding it in my fingers, needing to keep myself busy, I guess.

“Soooooo,” she says, bumping my leg with her knee. Even that little touch feels so good. I move my leg so it rests against hers. “I hear that you and Jenna had a little moment on Friday night.”

“Katie,” Ryan warns, kicking her under the table.

“Ow! Ryan! I’m just making conversation.” She bends over as well as she can with the table in her way to rub her shin. Ryan rolls his eyes and looks at me.

“It’s cool. I mean, nothing really happened.” I shrug and turn my attention to the server, who stops at our table to take my order. I tell her what I want and that I want it to go. She winks at me as she walks away, heading to the computer to put my order in. With a sigh, I turn toward Katie again, making sure to soak up all the heat of her leg against mine. “I like Jenna.” She smiles brightly. “I just don’t know that what she wants is what I can offer her.”

“What’s that mean?” Katie asks, her big doe eyes searching my face.

“I just . . .” I sigh again. “I don’t know. I think Jenna’s a great person, and she’s gorgeous, but I think she wants more, and I’m . . . I’m not . . . I’m just not looking for that.”

Ryan scoffs. “Yeah, Dare wants the dangly bits, not the hot pocket.”

Katie gasps, and I chuckle, shaking my head. She points a french fry at Ryan and scolds him. “You’re disgusting.” She pops the french fry into her mouth, turning to me. “I think you guys would be so great together, but whatever.”

She turns her attention back to her food, and I glance at Ryan. He shrugs like he’s saying he tried to tell her, and I just shake my head and smile.

“So, I talked to Lindsey Richardson the other day,” she drops, clearly not done with the conversation. I freeze, the straw paper that I was wrapping around my finger now turning the tip of my finger purple. I loosen it a little as she continues. “Apparently Lev is back in town.”

She takes a sip of her soda, her face turned toward Ryan but her eyes sliding over to me. I swallow hard and look at Ryan again. He’s no help, though, and so I drop my eyes back to my hands and tighten the paper around my finger again, waiting for Katie to continue.

“She said that he’s taking over his uncle’s motorcycle shop on Merchant Street,” Katie finishes.

I know the shop. I go by it often on my way to the bar where I like to hang out. It’s a nice shop, and his uncle did a great job with it, but I haven’t been there because I’m not into motorcycles. I clear my throat.

“Have, um—have you seen him?” I croak out, the words getting stuck in my throat. Katie glances at Ryan, and then he looks at me.

“I have not,” she says. “But Lindsey seemed really excited to have him home, and I’m sure he’s happy to have the shop now.”

My chest tightens as I try to process this information. For two years after Nate’s death, Lev stuck around but was a shell of himself, a lot like I was. He rarely talked to me if we ran into each other out in public. He disappeared from my life after the funeral, just like the rest of the Wolf Pack.

And that was exactly the opposite of what I needed. I so desperately needed to be a part of something. Any little bit of normalcy those guys could have provided me would have helped. And I so desperately *needed* for Lev to be here, to help me through the fucking pain, to make me feel something—*anything*—again. But he left. He fucking just left one day and didn’t even say goodbye.

The tough part is, I really liked him.

I don’t know why I expected more from him. I was just a young, stupid kid, I guess, trying to grieve but left without anyone. So fucking alone and lost. It’s sure as hell some weird, fucked-up karma that I thought of him just yesterday, and now, he’s back.

“Here you go.” The server’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts as she sets the to-go container, my drink, and the bill on the table in front of me.

I throw down a twenty, say thank you, and stand up, waving a goodbye to Ryan and Katie.

“Saturday night!” Ryan yells after me, and even though he doesn’t elaborate, I know he’s wanting me to go out for drinks and music with him this weekend. I’m ready to get fucked up again, so I throw my hand in the air to signal that I heard him and head out the door.

On my way home, my mind goes back to Lev. He’s home, and that means I’ll inevitably run into him. I wonder what he’s been doing the last six years and whether he’d even know me if he ran into me. I look a little different than I did when I was thirteen. I grimace inwardly, thinking about the shiny metal braces and buzz cut I had and those damn zits all over my face and back. And my fashion sense—lots of baggy clothes, like sweatpants and hoodies. I’m older now; I’ve refined my look, and I’ve clearly grown into my body. My baby fat turned into a more defined back and chest. My skin cleared up, my braces came off, and I got myself pierced and started dressing a bit darker. Now, I’m happy with my body and my style. It may not be what everyone prefers—like my dad—but it’s comfortable to me. And even though I’m empty on the inside, the package on the outside looks much more put together. I’m happy with who I am, whether Lev would recognize me or not.

It’s not until I’m pulling off the side of the road that I realize I didn’t go home from the diner. Thinking about Lev and my brother must have brought me here, instead, to the little inlet that was carved out by the town in Nate’s memory. It was really nice of them to do, but completely unnecessary. That’s what happens when someone young dies, though, isn’t it? People feel so helpless that they need to do *something*. So my dumbass brother, who thought it was okay to drive while he was completely fucked up, gets a shrine.

Grabbing my food, I climb out of the car and sit on the hood. I manage to take a bite of my sandwich, even as I stare at the tree Nate wrapped his car around that night over eight years ago now. But I feel the tears start to prick the back of my eyes, and I set my take-out container down, not interested in eating anymore.

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I lean my head on them and let the tears start to flow. Memories of that night flash through my mind. The phone ringing in the distance, pulling me from a dream. My mother wailing right after the phone stopped ringing, my father rushing into my room to get me up and out the door to the hospital. The sounds of beeping and the bright fluorescent lights accosting me when we got there. The stale smell of the

sterile room we were taken to. And then *those* words were uttered by the doctor. “We did everything we could. I’m sorry.” I’ll never forget the sound that tore out of my mother’s throat and the way my dad collapsed to his knees on the white tile floor.

“Fuck you, Nathan Archer. FUCK YOU!” I scream, slapping the food container off the car and watching it sail across the ground. “Fuck you for being such a fucking dumbass that you not only killed yourself, but you killed the rest of us too. You’re a fucking bastard, and I fucking HATE you,” I seethe, tears streaming down my face, my body shaking from the tears and anger. I yank at my hair with my fingers.

“I loved you, you dickhead. I needed my big brother, and you fucking threw it away. You fucking threw it all away. God, I hate you.” The tears continue to flow, and I let them, not even trying to hold back. “I fucking miss you,” I choke out between sobs.

I don’t even know how long I cry, but when the tears finally stop, I’m exhausted. My neck and shoulders are sore from tensing so much, I can’t breathe through my stuffed up nose, and my eyes and throat are burning. I know I’m going to get a headache soon, too.

I take a deep breath and press the heels of my hands into my eyes until it hurts. Then I slowly slide off the hood of the car, wiping my cheeks with my palms. I walk over and pick up the sandwich container, which landed a few feet away, leaving the sandwich for whatever critters want to indulge tonight, and then I toss the container in the trash can and climb back into the car.

Resting my head on the steering wheel, I take several long, deep breaths. Then, even though I’m so, so fucking tired and I just wish I could teleport home, I manage to start the engine, shift into drive, and pull back out onto the road, heading toward my house.

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Chapter 5

Levon

Five days ago, when I set foot in the shop for the first time in more than six years, the sight and the smell and the *feel* of it made it seem like I hadn't been gone a day. My uncle took good care of the place. This doesn't surprise me. One of the things he taught me was how important it is to take pride in your work. He's meticulous, and it's something I carried with me when I left and with the work I did in the shop in Sheltonville. I was lucky enough to find something that not only gave me more training but also fed my love of motorcycles. It was fun and paid the bills, but it didn't hold a candle to the way my uncle runs this place.

Looking around the shop more, I notice just how clean and organized it is. Tools and machinery line the walls, all blended in a color scheme of red, chrome, and black. The workstations have some oil stains but seem clean and highly functional. The shop smells like it's somewhere I belong, too, the scents of oil, exhaust, and chrome polish bringing me comfort, taking me back to when I used to come here as a kid.

It’s funny now, as I stop for a moment to stare at the full-wall mirror along the back wall of the shop behind the register. I can remember how my uncle used to let me sit on some of the bikes and how I’d see myself in that mirror, him beside me, holding me so I didn’t fall or knock the bike over. I thought I was so cool and couldn’t wait to get my own.

And now, here I am.

My uncle walks me through the rest of the shop and shows me the waiting room, the breakroom, and the back office, where he does his bookkeeping and such, and then we spend some time meeting people who will soon be *my* customers. He also shows me financial stuff and goes over how to place orders and bill customers. Just before I leave at the end of the first day, I bring my personal toolbox in and set it on the shop table nearest to the office, the one Uncle John always claimed as his own. I can barely believe it’s mine now. It feels surreal.

Over the next few days, Uncle John gives me a few bikes to work on, and although it’s only been about a week, it feels good to get my hands dirty again. The only thing I like better than riding a bike is working on one. As the week goes on, I’m quickly getting more comfortable and settled in with his—*my*—shop, and the place is starting to feel more like home. I’m happy to be using my hands and tools and skills again so soon.

By the time Saturday night rolls around, I’m definitely ready to go out and blow off some steam.

As I stand in front of the bathroom mirror at my apartment, brushing my teeth, excitement races through my veins, along with a healthy dose of nerves. Chris texted earlier this week, insisting I meet up with him and the rest of the Wolf Pack to catch up, grab a beer. I’m grateful for the invite since I’ve been shit about keeping up with my friends, and I wasn’t sure how they’d feel with me moving back.

But a little while earlier in the day, I got a text from Garrett, another member of the Wolf Pack, that solidified our plans for tonight, letting me know the Pack would be at his bar, a place called The Copper Exchange, and that they were all looking forward to seeing me. From what I hear, Garrett’s bar is a pretty cool place to hang out. Not only that, but Garrett is also apparently into motorcycles, as I found out when he stopped in at the shop yesterday. We didn’t have much time to catch up, but he told me he’s still best friends with Chris, who plays some local places with his band and is set up to play at The Copper Exchange today, which is probably why

Chris insisted I come. And honestly, I'm pumped for it. It sounds like the perfect opportunity to ease myself back into the Pack.

I rinse my mouth and then straighten and look at myself in the mirror, zeroing in on the tattooed silhouette of a wolf head howling at the moon inked on my upper arm. I chuckle thinking back on it—how we used to do the stupidest shit. When we turned sixteen, we all went together to some seedy place in the city and lied about our ages to get matching Wolf Pack tattoos. It's a crappy tattoo—my worst looking one, if I'm honest—but I've never covered it, even when I got my sleeve on this arm. It's faded, the ink more blue than black, but it meant something then, and it still means something now, a reminder of what the Pack meant to me, of what Nate meant to me.

And that's also why I'm excited for tonight, to see more familiar faces of friends I've missed. With everyone I've encountered since coming home, I've found myself releasing more of the tension and anxiety I have about people feeling resentful of my disappearing act and my utter lack of contact. It's been a warm welcome, and I hope that maybe, with more time, my old friends will make Glenrock feel even more like home again.

I'm not sure what the exact mood of Garrett's bar is, since I haven't been there. But I choose clothes that seem safe and comfortable, and as a final thought, I throw a baseball hat on. I really want to ride my bike, but it's colder than it has been, so I grab my car keys instead and leave my apartment.

Finding parking in the lot of The Copper Exchange is tricky. It's busy, but after a couple of rounds through the lot, I manage to snag a spot not too far from the entrance. Pocketing my wallet and keys, I grab my phone and climb out of the car. Then I make my way to the door and pull it open, taking in my surroundings.

The place is nice. It's sort of a mix between a pub and club. The main room has a stage set in the middle, raised slightly so you can see the band from all areas of the bar. In the back of the room, there are couches and chairs with lower tables, and in the front of the room sits a huge bar, backed by what looks like hundreds of bottles lining a lighted mirror. High-top tables are set sporadically around the room, and several pool tables and a dartboard are just visible in an enclave on the opposite end of the building. It's clean and just dark enough that the fluorescent lights aren't blinding, yet there's still a distinct, cozy bar-type feeling.

I spot Chris setting up on the stage, and even though I haven't seen him for a few years, he's easily recognizable. I walk over, and he sees me, a huge smile spreading across his face. He jumps down from the stage and gives me a hug.

"Lev!" he says, squeezing my shoulder as he pulls away. His eyes instantly morph to hold that pity behind them that makes a familiar anger stir in my gut.

Chris always pitied me after Nate died. I've worked hard to get out of the slump Nate's death forced me into, and I hate that people still immediately assume my need is for them to offer condolences or sympathy. So, I pretend I didn't see what I know I did, and I clap my hand on his back.

"How are you doing? It's been a long time." I say, forcing a smile.

"I'm good, man. Things are going well." He grabs his beer and takes a long drink. "You look good. How does it feel to be back?"

"It's good, it's good. I took over my uncle's motorcycle shop. Working there and just making my way again." I hear my name being yelled from the back of the room, and a big, bulky guy with curly hair comes barreling toward me. I immediately recognize Caleb as he grabs me in a bear hug, letting out a howl. You know . . .Wolf Pack . . . howls. Yeah, we were teenagers. Apparently, some people are hanging on to that a little too tightly. I shake my head as I pull myself from him.

"Lev!!! What is up, man! It's so good to see you!!"

"Caleb," I say with a smile. "You look great! How have you been?" As much as I enjoyed Caleb when we were teenagers, I didn't keep in touch with him much after Nate died. Since his house was the house where the party was, it was always a little bit awkward to be around him after the accident happened.

"I'm fantastic, man. You know, living the single life, partying." He lifts his beer like he's going to make a toast. "It's been great! Hey, I have a table over by the door with Nolan and his fiancée and Chris's lady. Come over! I'm going to the bar first, but meet me there? What do you want, my man?"

"Just a tonic and lime for me," I answer.

He side-eyes me, but I just shrug. I don't drink much anymore. The dark path I took right after Nate died scared the shit out of me. Losing your best friend at sixteen can really mess you up. That was one of the reasons I left for Sheltonville—to get my shit together and get out of this trap.

Caleb of all people should understand.

He gives me a nod and then heads off in the direction of the bar, and I blow out a breath to release some more of the tension building in my shoulders. Then I make my way over to the table to meet up with the others.

Nolan and his fiancée are there, as is Chris's wife. Outside of Nate, Nolan and I were probably the closest in the Pack, and we kept in touch through social media and occasional text messages. He's a good-looking guy, and people always teased that we should hook up. However, Nolan is about as straight as they make them. He was upset when I told him I was moving to Sheltonville, but he understood why I did it.

"Well, well, well. Look who we have here!" Nolan exclaims when he sees me. He puts his drink down and comes around the table to give me a hug. "Chris said you were coming. It's good to see you, Lev." Nolan's greeting is so genuine that my heart warms.

Caleb squeezes up beside me and Nolan. "Did you meet the ladies?" he asks, handing out our drinks.

"Nolan was just getting to that, I think," I say as Nolan nods and puts his arm around the woman beside him.

"Lev, this is my fiancée, Michelle. And this is Chris's wife, Sydney. Lev's part of the Wolf Pack and was Nate's like, best friend," he tells them, and I smile.

"Yeah, like blood brothers," Caleb jumps in.

I chuckle. "We all had some fun back then," I say, looking around at my old group of friends. Their faces are full of memories and caring sentiments. I drum my fingers on the table with another smile. "Well, I'm back now, so hopefully we can hang more often."

"More often!?" Nolan laughs. "How about we literally *can* hang out. Dude, you haven't really been back since you left."

"Touché," I concede. He's right, after all. In the entire six years I was gone, I only came back a handful of times. My parents and Lindsey visited me in Sheltonville several times, since they knew how hard it was for me to be back here. Mostly, though, I just stayed away, needing the time and space. "But at least I kept in touch, sort of," I tease, pushing Caleb's shoulder. "Unlike this one!"

"I've been . . . I was busy!" he laughs. "Hey, hey. Doesn't matter. What matters is we're all here now. Wolf Pack forever!" Caleb lets out a loud howl, and we all laugh and cower in fond embarrassment, feeling both at the same time.

Garrett and Chris join us shortly after the conversation dies off, bringing a round of drinks for us all. Handing me my water and lime, Garrett says, “You guys look like you’re having fun.”

“Just reliving some old times,” I tell him.

“Ah,” Garrett says with a chuckle. “Good or bad?”

“Uh, well, good so far . . .” I trail off, arching my eyebrows in confusion.

“He’s talking about all the shit that went down after,” Caleb says with an edge to his voice.

“Guys,” I hear Nolan say quietly.

“No, no.” Caleb spreads his arms out across the table. “Let’s lay it all out. We’re all here!”

Well, except Nate, I think. I feel like I have a rock in my gut. I glance at Nolan, and his eyes meet mine, pain and apology flowing through them.

I clear my throat. “Well, I know I made a lot of people upset when I left,” I say.

Everyone nods. “We get it man. We do.” That’s Nolan.

“You left, and we all sort of fell apart, Lev.” Garrett turns to me. “We hit it hard for a while after—”

“Just say it,” I cut in. “After Nate died, and I left.”

Garrett downs his beer. “Yeah, okay? We buried Nate, you left, and we fell apart. We all drank our faces off and barely talked to each other.”

“Because none of us knew what to say,” Caleb admits quietly. We all look at him. “We fucked up that night, and our lives were never—and won’t ever be—the same again. You ran from here, and we fell deeper into the hole when the reality is that we all should have been getting through it together.”

I’m caught off guard a little by this conversation, but I know that it has to happen, so I keep going. I clear my throat. “I had to leave,” I say. “I don’t really want to say I’m sorry for that, but if it helps, I will.” I stare down at the lime in my glass. “I was headed for something really bad. I wanted to die so I could be with Nate. If I didn’t leave, I wasn’t going to make it.” I look up to four pairs of eyes on me. My old friends. “It broke me. But I had to.”

A deafening and uncomfortable silence oozes across the table before Nolan breaks it. “We get it,” he says. “We’re just glad you’re back.” He lifts his glass, and everyone else slowly follows suit to clink our glasses together. “Wolf Pack forever,” he says. We let out a quiet, collective howl

that doesn’t seem as teenage-silly anymore and all take a drink before setting our glasses down again.

Garrett gives me a half hug and announces that he has to get back to the bar. Although we just had a difficult conversation, I think it was years in the making, and it was needed if we’re going to move forward together. We were all so tight in high school before the accident. Inseparable. I feel a little better after the conversation, and everyone else seems to be feeling the same.

Chris excuses himself and heads back to the stage for sound check, and we all refill our drinks. Before long, the band is launching into their set. It’s not my favorite type of music, but it’s a cool atmosphere and so it isn’t terrible to listen to. They work the crowd on some songs and play background music for others.

The others and I fall into easy conversation, and it’s a relief to feel normal around my friends again.

After a particularly good song and another round of drinks, Caleb turns to me. “Lev, Nolan and I were talking yesterday about the night that we snuck onto the campus of Northhead High and toilet papered the statue of their moose mascot.”

“And then it rained,” Nolan blurts out with a laugh.

“And the toilet paper got all hard and crusty around the moose,” Caleb throws in.

“I heard they were so pissed about it.” Nolan chuckles. “Their poor janitor had to scrub the moose.”

Something about that statement has us all laughing hard.

“Remember in ninth grade when we skipped and took the train to New York so this guy”—I point to Caleb— “could meet the girl he thought he was going to marry?”

Caleb buries his head in his hands and groans. “There was so much wrong with that,” he says.

“Yeah,” I chime in. “We were so dumb. As if our parents weren’t going to get a call from school.”

“The fact that we were *all* absent,” Nolan adds, and we laugh again.

“How long were we grounded for?” I ask, shaking my head.

Nolan shakes his head, still cackling. “Shit, I’m probably still grounded for that.”

“And we never got Caleb to meet his girl!” I remind them.

“Catfished!!” Nolan and I say at the same time.

“You guys suck,” Caleb chuffs.

I’m still chuckling as I excuse myself to use the bathroom. Walking down the hallway to the back, an odd sensation runs down my spine, and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. It’s uncomfortable at best, and my shoulders tighten as I reach the bathrooms. There are two single-use restrooms at the end of the hallway, but both doors are closed, and when I try the handles, they’re locked.

With an impatient sigh, I lean against the wall and cross my arms over my chest to wait for someone to finish and come out so I can go. Finally, after what seems like several minutes, one of the doors opens, and a man exits, giving me a nod. I return it and go into the bathroom to do my business. After I finish and wash my hands, I open the door and lean back to toss the paper towel into the trashcan when a body slams into me.

“Woah.” I grab the man’s shoulders and try to steady him, but he’s immediately whipped away from me and slammed against the hallway wall by another man. Their lips are locked with an intensity that tells me they probably don’t even realize I’m here, and that chill comes back, along with a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I try to maneuver around them and give them their privacy, but I catch a glimpse—the slightest flash—of something shiny glinting with the light in the hallway. Trying not to stare, I stand there like an idiot as things start to fall into place. The instigator pulls away from the other man and glares at me.

“Can I help you?” he says, still holding onto the other man’s black-leather-clad biceps as he presses their hips together.

I barely hear him, though, because I’m frozen, staring at the other man—the man who’d slammed into me a moment ago. All near six feet of him, with his jet-black hair and emerald-green eyes, the few piercings in his ear, and—damn—a fucking lip ring. My heart skips a beat as our eyes meet.

“I said, can I help you?” the instigator growls, snapping me out of whatever daze I’m in.

My shoulders tighten again, and I don’t move, unsure what to do. Darian Archer is being held by this man against the wall, and they were in a major lip-lock just thirty seconds ago. Right now, looking at him, I can only think one thing: He’s gorgeous. Absolutely, fuckingly, stunningly gorgeous. I can’t speak. I can’t swallow. I can’t really do anything. My eyes are locked

on Darian’s. He’s clearly fucked up, his eyes red and glassy, and he’s giving me a look—one that can only be described as taunting. His beautiful, full, pink, pierced lip turns upward into a sly smile, and my mouth suddenly goes dry. He leans forward and kisses the dude he’s with on the cheek, throwing his arms up over the man’s shoulders.

“It’s okay, Lance,” Darian says. “I know him. We just haven’t seen each other for a while.” He tilts his head toward me and winks. Fucking winks. “Hi, Levon.” My name rolls over his lips, and something happens to my gut.

Holy shit.

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Chapter 6

Darian

"It's okay Lance," I tell him. "I know him. We just haven't seen each other for a while." I tilt my head toward him and wink. "Hi, Levon."

Lev swallows hard. "H-hey, Darian." That's all he gets out before Lance looks at him, clearly agitated.

"Sorry, man, but we're busy." Lance moves his hand between the two of us, signaling that something was going on and that he'd like to continue. Then he presses his lips against me again. My eyes remain trained on Lev as he shifts to his other foot.

"Oh, yeah, right. Right. Sorry." He swallows again, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets. "I'm sorry. It's good to see you, Darian," he says, turning his hat around so the brim covers his forehead and casts a shadow over his bright-blue eyes.

The lighting is not great back here, but I can see that his eyes are the same as they used to be—a deep blue, intelligent, kind. And maybe they're even more blue than I remember. My cock gets even harder at the thought,

which I honestly didn't think was possible. Lev's smile tightens, and he turns around and walks back toward the bar as Lance attacks my lips again.

I let him, leaning into his touch and trying to get lost in the familiar.

It's like that with Lance—he's a sure thing. I think Lance and I use each other to meet our needs, if I'm being honest. One of us gives the signal, and it's on, and neither of us seem to feel badly about that. When he pressed his lips to my ear just a few minutes ago and whispered "bathrooms," I wasn't going to say no.

I had no fucking idea we'd run into Lev.

Still lip-locked with Lance, I glance toward the bar. Garrett's there, deep in conversation with a few people sitting in the row of stools. My stomach churns as I picture him scowling at me. He'd be relieved to see me leave, I'm sure. In the few short months since I turned twenty-one and started coming here regularly, I've caused trouble more than a few times—getting in fights or passing out on the couches. Garrett doesn't really like that, especially when he's had to get me a ride home or kick me out after closing. If I were anyone else, I'm sure I wouldn't be allowed back in here to drink.

Lance's hand rubs suggestively down to my ass, pulling me back to the present.

"Did you drive?" I ask him, suddenly needing to get out of here.

"Mm-hmm," he murmurs against me.

"Good. Let's go." I take Lance's hand, and without another glance toward Lev or Garrett or the bar, we head out the back door and to his car.

Lance takes me to his place, and we fuck. Usually having sex with Lance is enjoyable. He can at least make me feel good for the time that we're doing what we do, and he does cuddle for a few minutes after we finish. That's the real reason I like it. He's a cuddler. Normally, it's great.

So why is it that the whole time we're together tonight, all I see is a black baseball hat and eyes the color of the bluest sky?

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Chapter 7

Levon

Even as Monday morning rolls around and my alarm clock goes off, I can't get that face with those emerald-green eyes, gorgeous lips, and taunting smile out of my head. Dare is beautiful. His features are perfect, the contrast of his pale skin with his dark hair and plush pink lips. There's something about him that's alluring. I think that's the word that best describes him. *Alluring.*

And he knows it too. He showed me that when he gave that little smirk and said my name.

My cock stirs as I think about how my name sounded coming from his lips.

Jesus, am I that hard up that just him saying my name is making me feel this way? It's only been a few weeks since I ended things with Seth. What I need is to get settled here in my job and with my friends and family. I don't need sex or a relationship making things awkward.

It's exciting, though, knowing that Dare's into guys. I really shouldn't feel that way, and I *shouldn't* feel that way about him, but I smile at the

thought, nonetheless.

It makes sense, though. I remember one particular night that we were all hanging out at Nate's, probably a few months before he died. The whole Pack was there, and we were all out at the pool, drinking and getting high. I had to take a leak, so I went into the house through the back sliding door and downstairs to use the bathroom in the basement game room.

Dare was sitting on the couch in the dark, watching a movie. The only light in the room was coming from the TV, and although I don't remember what movie he was watching, I do remember him jumping up from a reclined position and throwing a pillow over his midsection. The friend he had over was instantly on his feet, fumbling with his hair. I was sure I'd interrupted something. That should have been my first clue he was into guys or at least that some sort of exploration was happening. Nate never talked about it with me, and I never said anything, so I wonder if he even knew.

I run my hand over my face to draw myself out of the memory. Then I get out of bed, take a quick shower, and leave for work.

About a half hour later, I push open the door to the shop. My uncle is already there, working on the inventory. I quickly join him, and he shows me what he's been working on, plus a list of a few of the tasks on the schedule for the day—some inspections, a couple of oil changes, and an appointment for a tire change as well.

Before I know it, it's midafternoon, and I hear a bike pull into the garage. I immediately know what it is—a Harley-Davidson Street 750. I'd recognize it anywhere. The rumble of the engine ceases as it's cut, and Garrett gets off the bike as I walk over to admire it.

"This another one?" I ask. It's not the same bike he brought in the other day. Wiping my hands on a rag, I look it over. It's one of my favorites, and in all black. "A 2018?"

Garrett leans against the machine. "Yep, 2018. You got it. And yeah, this is my other one." He smiles. "Street and I go way back." He runs his hand down the leather seat to the back end of the bike with reverence.

I smile, understanding his love for the bike and how he's given it a name. I feel similarly about mine. There's just something about feeling that power under you and taking off on the open road.

"That's a really nice bike, man." I let my eyes roam over it, taking in its sleek frame and lower seat. I shake my head. "So, what brings you in again

so soon?” I ask.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his wallet. “I just need some brake pads. Didn’t realize I needed them when I was here the other day. I can change them, but I wanted to pick them up here.”

“Cool,” I reply. “Let’s do it.” I motion for Garrett to follow me, and we head into the retail part of the shop. “I’m still learning all the ins and outs of the system my uncle uses for orders, so be patient.” I smirk at Garrett. “Let me see what we have or if I need to order them for you.” I walk around the back of the desk and get on the computer.

As I’m searching for what Garrett needs, he clears his throat. “So I didn’t get to talk to you much this weekend. How is it being back?” he asks.

“It’s fine,” I reply, clicking through a few tabs. “I’m getting adjusted.”

“Well, we’re glad you’re back. I missed you, Lev.”

I look up to see Garrett smiling warmly at me, and I smile back at him and nod. It’s kind of awkward talking to him like this. It’s been a while. “So, the bar seems to be doing well,” I say, trying to make conversation. “Nice place.”

“Thanks, man. Yeah. It was a good investment. It’s paying the bills, for sure.”

I see that we have the brake pads that he needs in stock, so I excuse myself for a minute to get them from the back storage room.

As I ring Garrett up, he continues the conversation. “So, that’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about.”

I give him a quizzical look.

“I don’t know if you saw him on Saturday night, but Dare frequents my bar quite often.”

My stomach takes a tumble at the sound of his name, and I try to shake off the feeling. “Yeah,” I reply. “I saw him.” A flash of his gorgeous smile with that lip ring sparkling in the light crosses my mind. I draw in a breath, steadying my hands as I staple Garrett’s receipt to his bag and hand him the pads.

“I’m worried about him, Lev,” Garrett says, his voice taking on a softer tone. “He’s really not okay. I’ve done what I can to help him out, but there are times that I see him leaving and he’s pretty messed up.” He puts his card in his wallet and slides his wallet into his back pocket. “He’s still drinking pretty hard, and I’ve seen his eyes all red and bloodshot way too many times. I’ve cut him off a few times, too, and I never let him drive home if he

brings himself. I care about him, but I won't lose my liquor license over him."

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask.

Running his hand through his hair, he blows out a breath. "It's just that I know how close you and Nate were. I know you looked out for Dare—hell, we all did—and I need you to know that he's not doing okay. His parents all but abandoned him after . . ." He trails off, shrugging.

I frown as Garrett's words sink in. They abandoned him? I knew his parents were struggling with losing their son, but I didn't think they turned on Dare. What does that even mean? And how am I supposed to respond? Thankfully, Garrett goes on so I don't have to talk. I don't miss how he skips talking about Nate's death directly.

"A few weeks ago, I had to call him a ride, and just last week, he tried to start shit with someone. I think he likes to let his feelings out like that or something. But I can't have that." He finishes and shakes his head.

"I'm not sure what you want me to do about this, Garrett," I say, feeling a strange sense of irritation at his words. "I haven't seen or talked to Darian in six years. My sister is the one who's kept me up on anything, and she barely sees him because she's always at work."

"Come on, Lev. He always looked up to you. Everyone knows that. When you left—" He swallows hard. "When you left, I think he fell apart even more."

Garrett should have just punched me in the gut. *Why* is he telling me this? My stomach rolls at the thought of Dare hurting and the fact that I was the reason he couldn't get through Nate's death in a healthy way. "I'm not sure what you want, Garrett, but Saturday night was the first time I saw him since I left. *Six* years ago. And he seemed to be doing *just* fine when I ran into him." Visions of Dare and the guy he was with flash through my head. I frown again. "Also," I say, my voice softening, "he's definitely not a kid anymore. I'm not sure what you want from me. I was never his babysitter, and I'm not going to start now. I don't know him at all anymore." There's a reason for that, I want to add. But I keep it to myself.

Garrett seems to sense my emotion and holds his hands up in front of him. "Okay, okay. I was just going ask that if you see him around or you're out at the Exchange and you notice he's fucked up, can you either let me know or help him out? I'm worried about him, and I can only do so much. When I'm working, I can't keep an eye on him myself. I've asked the other

guys, but their relationship with him was different. You know how it was with us in the Wolf Pack, and Dare's kinda always unofficially been a part of it."

I shrug and twist my face, guilt rising up in my chest again. "Okay, yeah, sure" is all I can really say. And anyway, it's the least I can do, isn't it? Keeping an eye on Dare. Hell, I'll sit with him every night if it'll make up for what I did, disappearing on him when he apparently needed me more than I knew. But I'm not going to share that with Garrett.

"Thank you. I'm sorry if this was uncomfortable. I'm just worried about him, you know?"

I nod, and he thanks me and turns to leave the store. He fires up his bike and waves as he takes off, the engine's thrum fading away into the distance. I stand behind the desk for a long time, trying to figure out what that was all about and why Garrett would try to pull me into whatever mess Dare has made.

As I move on with the rest of my day, Garrett's words play on repeat in my head.

When you left, I think he fell apart even more.

What am I supposed to do with that information? I can't help the nagging feeling that it's my fault Dare fell apart. I should have been more available to him.

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Chapter 8

Darian

"Ugh!" I let out a sigh and drop my forehead to my desk. I've been working late into the night most of the week, trying to finalize these initial sketch ideas for the Miller project.

It's now Thursday, and I just want to be done with this and send it over. But my mind isn't letting me focus. It keeps going back to Saturday night, to that look on Lev's face when he realized who I was—it was like . . . shock and a sliver of desire. Or maybe I'm making shit up. All I know is that he's still hot as fuck and he's giving me designer's block. I'm not sure that's even a thing, but I've got it. I hate that I can't just lose myself in the process like I usually do. The client wants a very specific design and for the colors to integrate into one another, and I just can't seem to get it to look like something I find acceptable to hand in to them. I take pride in my work, and I won't just give them something subpar to call the project done. But this is getting ridiculous with the number of hours I've spent just sitting here, unable to make anything work.

My stomach growls, and I look at the clock, unsurprised but also irritated to see it's much later than dinnertime. I slam my hand on the desk and push my

chair back, brushing my hair from my forehead. I reach for my phone and send a quick text to Ryan.

Me: Did you eat?

He responds almost immediately.

Ryan: Not yet. What's up?

Me: I'm stuck on this project and need a change of scenery. Meet me at the diner?

Ryan: Sure, give me 10 and I'll head out.

Ryan is seriously the *best* best friend. He's the first person I came out to as bisexual, and he didn't even bat an eye. Honestly, I really didn't really have to come out to him in the formal sense. He just noticed that when we would go to parties, I would disappear with people, sometimes a girl and sometimes a guy. One night he asked, and I told him. Sure, he gives me a hard time and jokes about it, but I think that's because he's so incredibly straight that the thought of any dick other than his own freaks him out.

He's also just easy to be around and kinda accepts me for exactly who I am *now*. I feel like when we lost Nate, life became two-dimensional, divided cleanly into "before Nate" and "after Nate." Ryan only knows this version of me. I like that, because there is no "before Nate" with us, and it's definitely better that way, since I'm a different person than I was before. His dad is in real estate, and his family moved here from a small town about forty minutes away to help Ryan's grandfather grow their client base to keep the business afloat. I think they've been more successful here, but Ryan's dad wants him to take over the family business when he's ready, and Ryan wants nothing to do with it. I'm not really sure how that's all going to go down.

Because he wasn't around "before Nate," Ryan has no problem letting me talk about Nate and my parents whenever I need to, and he never pushes me for more. There were many nights that I crashed at his house, not wanting to be alone or after getting messed up, although that's happened less in the last year since he's now in a serious relationship with Katie, which takes up a lot of his time. But that's how it goes. I like Katie, though, and the two of them are a perfect match. I assume they'll get married eventually.

I'd love to find something like that.

A few minutes later, the smell of fried food and garlic attacks my nose as I open the door to the diner and walk into the lobby area. Ryan's already there, standing in the corner and looking at his phone, so I walk over.

"Hey," I greet.

He pockets his phone and gives my shoulder a shove. "What's up, asshole?"

I step back into place. "Did you give your name?"

"Yeah. She said it would only be like five minutes."

Just as Ryan says that, the hostess calls his last name, and we turn to follow her through the restaurant to a booth in the back room. I prefer this, being tucked in a corner and not in the middle of the restaurant, and I wonder if Ryan knew that and asked for it.

We get ourselves settled and look over the menu as a server comes by and takes our drink orders. Once she's gone, we both go back to perusing the menu.

"So, what's Katie doing tonight?" I ask. "I'm actually surprised that you're free to come out alone."

He smirks at me. "Aww, lovey. You know I will always make time for you." He purses his lips like a kiss. I throw a sugar packet at him. "She's babysitting," he says. "Her neighbors have some meeting tonight and asked her to help out."

I nod. "That's cool."

After the server comes back with our drinks, she takes our food order, collects our menus, and heads back to the kitchen, and Ryan leans in, setting his elbows on the table.

"So, how's work going?" he asks.

I roll my eyes and let out a frustrated sigh. "Ugh, I texted you to meet here because I'm struggling. I have this one account that needs so much, and it's just not happening. I do eight hundred things, and I'm not happy with any of them. They want these two images to sort of blend into one, but I can't get the colors to work, and it just looks stupid." I show him my phone where I have some of the proofs and raw drawings. "It's like I have it in my head what I want to put down, but when I try out stuff, nothing looks right."

"Let's see."

Ryan bounces a few ideas off of me, and I consider them but still can't conceptualize how I'll get the images to come together like I know the client wants. Before I get more frustrated with it, I put my phone away and change the subject.

“Enough about my work. How’s yours going?”

Ryan throws his head back and groans loudly. “It’s so boooooring, Dare.”

I chuckle. “Sucks, man. I wish you could break free from that.”

“Yeah, me too. Never gonna happen.” His face is forlorn, but he waves it off and changes the subject again, talking a little bit louder over the clanging of the dishes as a busser cleans and resets the booth behind us, along with another table diagonal from us. Ryan goes on about something with Katie for a bit, and we sip our drinks. It’s nice.

A few minutes later, the server brings our food. “You boys let me know if you need anything, okay?”

Once she leaves, we dive in. I take a big bite of my burger just as a group of four is led into the room and to the newly cleaned table across the row. The food gets caught in my throat when I recognize them. It’s the Richardson family. All four of them. My eyes are immediately drawn to Mr. Richardson as he squeezes his wife’s hand and places a kiss on her knuckles when he passes her a menu. He holds onto her hand as they scoot closer, shoulder to shoulder, and read the menu together.

I take a drink of my water to quell my coughing.

“Dude! You okay?” Ryan is half laughing but has a look of concern on his face. He turns to see what has me all worked up.

Lindsey Richardson spots us and gives a wave, then puts her hand on her brother’s arm and whispers to him. Ryan turns back to me at the same time that Lev swivels his head around toward us. Those beautiful crystal-blue eyes meet mine, and all the air leaves my lungs. Lev smiles and gives me a nod, and the room gets fuzzy. I lift a hand in a wave, which I realize must look so stupid, and Lev quickly looks away.

Ryan narrows his eyes at me.

“What?” I snap.

He laughs and shakes his head. “Lev, huh?”

“Lev, huh?” I mimic him, adding more of a gruff sound to my voice. “Lev nothing.” I bite down on a french fry and look over at the table again, to Lev’s face as he looks at the server, telling her his order or something. Our eyes meet again, and he immediately looks back to the woman taking his order.

Lindsey says something to Lev and pushes his upper arm, smirking at him. He returns the gesture by messing up her hair, and she smacks his hand away.

Mrs. Richardson is smiling at them.

Their relationship is just so . . . easy. *God*, I miss that touch. I miss wrestling and pushing and playing around with Nate.

With a sudden swell of nausea, I realize I've lost my appetite. I toss my napkin on top of my plate.

"Seriously, Dare," Ryan says, a little more quietly, his eyes bouncing between me and the Richardsons. "What's this all about?"

And I can't answer him because I don't know. What *is* this all about? Why am I feeling overwhelmingly jealous about a family having dinner together? Why does watching them play around with each other make my eyes sting? Why am I all starstruck and stupid when it comes to this man whom I haven't seen or talked to in six years? The ease and comfort that they have with one another—I used to have that with my family. The teasing, touching, hugging. My parents used to hug and kiss and hold hands. I miss seeing them with each other, and I miss the normalcy. I miss it desperately. Hell, I miss just getting a hug whenever I needed one. I even miss wrestling with Nate.

The weight of everything pushes down on my chest again, and I suck in a breath, feeling all the emptiness and loneliness I've been struggling with for years now. I've tried to fill the void in so many ways—sex, drinking, smoking—but the feelings never quite go away. Even sitting here with Ryan having a normal conversation about normal things doesn't stop me from *needing* something more.

And Lev . . . well, yeah, he's hot. He's fuck hot. But he was Nate's friend, and outside of that, we were nothing.

I let out a sharp breath and fish for my wallet in my pocket. "I think I just need to go home and get some sleep," I say to Ryan.

Ryan laughs. "Now I *know* you're full of shit because you don't sleep well!" He waves a french fry in my face like a finger. "Do you have a thing for him?"

This is the thing about Ryan that I really love. He doesn't pussyfoot around me and treat me differently. He found me broken and fucked up and just accepted me as I was.

That doesn't mean I'm telling him anything tonight, though.

"Fuck you," I say lightly, taking a twenty-dollar bill out of my wallet and laying it on the table. I can't seem to make sense of the emotions I feel when I see Lev. I'm angry and upset, but I also have such fond memories of him being around and hanging out at our house. I don't know which of the emotions is stronger.

"Thanks for meeting me," I tell Ryan, and without waiting for his response, I stand up and head out of the diner, listening to him laugh as I walk away.

I’m emotional the entire drive home. The anger and the sadness . . . and the attraction . . . they’re warring with each other. My eyes sting, and my chest is tight, and I almost feel sick to my stomach. Why does he make me feel something I can’t define? I haven’t said more than hello to Lev Richardson since he left. Why am I so affected by just being in the same room with him?

I picture his face again, the icy-blue eyes. The chiseled jaw. The dimple.

Once I’m inside my house, I go straight up to my room. I drop my pants and strip off my shirt and head into the bathroom for a quick, hot shower. When I’m done and dressed again, I get comfortable on my bed in just my boxers and socks. I pull out my phone to search for Lev on social media.

There are photos of him all over his page.

Some are of Lev and his family, some are of him and his sister or just her, as though she’d sent him photos that posted to his page. A few pictures are probably his friends from Sheltonville. In one particular picture, he’s standing in dark jeans and no shirt. He’s outside, and his skin is glistening, a sheen of sweat on his abs and chest. My mouth goes dry as I lick my lips, and my dick starts to thicken. It’s not long before it’s standing at full attention in my underwear. I zoom in on the picture, and see Lev’s got a huge smile on his face, his dimple so deep I want to put my tongue in it.

I’m so hard, and without thinking too much about it, I slide my hand down my stomach and under the waistband of my boxers, pushing them down under my balls. With one hand holding the phone and the other wrapped around my hard dick, I start to stroke myself. Using my precum as lube, I jerk myself harder, a moan escaping my lips. It feels so fucking good.

I close my eyes and picture Lev’s strong arms and thick chest pressing against me, him kissing me and biting my lip. My balls grow tighter, and a tingling rolls down my spine. I picture his arms around me and his mouth all over my body, sucking and licking and taking what he wants. As I get to the edge, I squeeze my dick harder and move my hand faster while I imagine waking up next to him in his arms, that hard, broad chest against my back and his cock pushing against my ass.

“Oh, god!” I moan again, tensing as I come all over my hand and my stomach, my orgasm pulsing out of me. I shudder and stroke myself a few more times, until the sensation is too much to handle. Breathing rapidly, I open my eyes, and my gaze meets Lev’s on my phone screen. I drop the phone on my bed and take a few deep breaths, waiting for my heart to stop racing.

Eventually, I get up, wash my hands and stomach, and throw on clean boxers. I should try to sleep, but my mind won't stop. So instead, I go to my desk and turn on my tablet.

The project that's been stressing me out is still there, taunting me. I sit down and run my hands through my hair, closing my eyes for a moment. An idea suddenly hits me, and the image of what I want to do comes to mind. *I know what they want.* I start putting the design together, and within about two hours, I have a finished product. Relieved and now unburdened, I send the files over to the client and get ready for bed.

A moment later, I crawl under the covers, curl up, and settle in, my mind at ease for the first time in a while. I think seeing Lev tonight gave me some sort of emotional and physical release and kinda restarted my brain, unblocking me. Who knew an orgasm and visions of a certain man would give me the inspiration I was so desperately waiting for?

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Chapter 9

Levon

It's Friday night, and Lindsey has the day off from work for a change. She was thrilled when I asked her to come along with me to The Copper Exchange to meet up with some of the guys and watch Chris's band play.

The place is already busy when we get there, and after we head to the table to meet with the other guys, I quickly scan the room. My eyes fall on someone at the bar who's talking to one of the bartenders I recognize from last week. The bartender fills a tray full of shots, smiling and talking, and then pushes the tray toward the man my eyes are locked onto.

My heart pounds in my chest, and the hair stands up on my neck and arms again. It seems that happens a lot when I'm around Dare.

Dressed in oversized black pants with chains and leather, a black T-shirt, and a black knit beanie, he's not hard to recognize. The profile and style are unmistakably *Dare*. He throws some money down on the bar and takes the tray of drinks with him, turning and heading away from me.

Disappointment creeps in the farther he gets from me. I can't deny whatever this pull is; he draws me in. I want to watch him, learn what he's

doing, learn more about him. But when I scan the room again, he's nowhere in sight. He must be sitting somewhere else, maybe in the corner or the other room.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts by Nolan's voice. "You looking for someone?" he asks.

I clear my throat. "Garrett asked me to keep an eye on Dare when I see him here. Where does he usually hang out?" I wave my drink around, making a sweeping motion to indicate to the room. Nolan smirks, and when I glance at Lindsey, she's smirking too. I palm her face with my free hand and push her back.

"Hey!" she squeals, shoving my shoulder.

Nolan gives me a look with a raised eyebrow and points to the back corner, completely opposite of where we're sitting and exactly diagonal from our table. The stage is in between, so that explains why I couldn't see him and didn't realize he was here when we first walked in. I try to be nonchalant about it all, but I know my friends—at least Nolan and Lindsey—can see right through me.

When Chris's band—which I now know is called Murky Soup—finishes the next song, I ask if anyone wants anything from the bar, and then I head that direction to get everyone another round. I try not to look for Dare on my way, but it's impossible. Once I get up to the counter, it's easy to spot him. Sitting on one of the plush leather chairs in the far back corner, he's talking with the guy I saw him with at the diner, an attractive blonde on the guy's lap. They're leaning into one another so they can hear over the music, and it looks like they're having a good conversation.

I stare in his direction probably a few seconds too long, watching as Dare throws his head back in a laugh and then downs the rest of his drink. He motions toward the bar, then stands up and heads my way. I try to take a deep breath, but all the air has left my lungs, and the room suddenly gets overly warm, heat creeping up my neck and into my cheeks.

Why am I nervous? And why is my stomach fluttering?

He keeps his eyes trained on me as he waltzes up to the bar. There's no mistaking that he sees me. Waiting for either Garrett or another one of the bartenders to address him, he turns and looks at me, a sly smirk spreading on his lips. "I guess we're going to keep running into each other now."

I clear my throat and smile at him, nodding. His voice is light and airy. Smooth, even.

He shifts to the other leg and says, “If that’s the case, we should probably say hi. So . . . hi, Lev.” He has this shit-eating grin on his face, and I can’t figure out why he’s being so coy. He runs his eyes up and down my body, sticking just the tip of his tongue out and toying with his lip ring.

Whatever it is about this guy, it lights me on fire. “H-hi,” I stammer, reaching out my hand to shake his.

Pull it together, Lev!

I almost groan at the ridiculousness of it all. I’m a twenty-four-year-old professional and business owner. I am a full-on man. But yet, I can’t make a sentence around this guy. He laughs—*laughs*—at me and takes my hand.

“Welcome back. It’s good to see you.” His hand is warm and soft. It fits perfectly in mine, and I find myself not wanting to let go of it. My body sparks when Dare rubs his fingers lightly over my wrist. The sensation startles me, and I pull my hand away, tingles running up my arm.

Garrett must have been needed elsewhere, because another bartender approaches right then and takes our orders. While the bartender makes Dare’s drinks and the drinks for my table, Dare turns to me again. I barely register what he’s saying because my hand is still tingling from our contact. I wipe it on the side of my jeans.

“How have you been?” he asks me.

I’m able to put a few words together after a thick swallow. “I-I’m good. Doing well. Thanks for asking. How are you?” I sound like a freaking robot. I do know how to make conversation with him, but for some reason I’m rattled. I shake my head.

“Look,” I say at the same time that he says, “I know.”

We both pause.

“Go ahead,” I tell him.

“No, it’s cool. You say what you wanted to.” He motions to me to talk.

I take a breath. “So, yeah. I’m back. Here. For good. If you need anything, let me know, okay?” My voice is soft and genuine, and I mean every word that comes out of my mouth. I may have run away after Nate died, but I’m here now, and maybe he’ll allow me to make it up to him somehow.

Dare lets me know immediately that’s not happening any time soon. He scoffs. “Yeah. Welcome back, Lev, but . . . I’m good. I’ve had to make it this long, and I think I can make it without you for a bit longer.”

My chest tightens.

He takes his drinks and walks away, and I swear he's sashaying, leaving me staring at him wide-eyed as he heads back to the section where his friends wait.

I almost feel dizzy. I'm not sure what just happened there. He went from almost flirting with me to completely cold . . . and fucking sashaying away!

Dazed, I shake my head. Once I collect myself, I grab our drink order and head back to the table.

My sister puts her hand on my arm after I've set all the drinks down. "Everything okay?" she asks.

I nod.

"You sure?" She raises her eyebrows as she sips from the straw in her new drink. "You look like something's up. You're flushed and acting all weird."

Nolan glances my way as she talks to me.

"Yeah. I mean, I ran into Dare at the bar. We keep running into each other, so I figured I would say hi. You're the one who told me I would see him a lot since I'm back now, Linds."

"Then why do you look like you just saw a ghost?" she says with a chuckle.

"Have you guys kept in touch or something?" Nolan asks.

I turn to him and can't explain why I suddenly feel protective of Dare. "No, no. Not at all. I've just seen him a few times since I've been back and figured I might as well say hi."

Nolan laughs, then raises his eyebrows suggestively. "I'm sure he didn't mind that."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Nolan's fiancée shoots him a bewildered look.

"It means that everyone in the Wolf Pack knows he had it bad for you when we were growing up."

Lindsey laughs, and I shoot her an incredulous look.

Caleb's brow creases, and he looks at Nolan. "What the hell are you smoking, dude?"

"Seriously?" Nolan says. "Okay, well, you guys all had your heads up your asses, then, because it was obvious as fuck to me."

"You're full of shit," I tell him, then turn back to the stage, rattled and confused. Thankfully, Murky Soup starts another set and saves me from further conversation.

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Chapter 10

Darian

"Darian! Daaarrriaannnnn!" my mother's screeching voice yells up the stairs.

I'm in my room, just waking up and letting my first cup of coffee ooze through my veins when I hear her calling to me. She's become sort of a nuisance when she does come by the house. Blowing out a breath and pushing back my chair, I stand up to go see the woman who birthed me.

"DARIAN!!" she yells again as I walk into the hallway and look to the bottom of the steps.

"Hi, Mom," I say, gripping my coffee mug. It's way too fucking much first thing in the morning.

"Oh, Darian. You're up. I would certainly hope so." Always with the backhanded comments. "I thought I might have woken you, even though the day is half over." She's looking like she's had a full day already, dressed in a sleek black velour running suit with white sneakers, her hair and makeup perfect. She's holding a pair of heels in her hand.

I walk down the steps to meet her in the living room. “It’s ten o’clock in the morning. I was getting logged into work,” I inform her. There’s no sense of joy in my voice. Neither for seeing her or having a conversation with her.

“Well, you look like you just woke up,” she says with a tsk. “I’m home from the wellness retreat in Cabo and need to get to the salon in an hour for my hair and nail appointment. Remember I leave again tomorrow for my Reiki and Yoga Balance seminar. It’s Thursday through next weekend. I’ll be gone just over a week, learning to balance my energy in Colorado. Isn’t that a wonderful place for a retreat like that?”

I stare at her. “What time are you leaving tomorrow?” I ask her flatly.

She lets out a chortling sound. “Well, before you’ll be awake if today is any indication. Darian, have you heard from your father at all?”

I just stare at her for a moment, taking her in, and that emptiness in my chest aches. I barely see her anymore. She’s aged, but it’s clear that she’s been trying to fight the process. She used to be so vibrant and full of joy. Her eyes always sparkled. That light slowly dimmed from them after Nate died. I can remember seeing it slowly fading out.

She still technically lives here, in our family home, but she’s often out for weeks at a time, rarely staying here. I haven’t had the mom I had as a kid since Nate’s death. Before, my mom was fun and involved, and we did a lot of things as a family. After Nate died, my mom couldn’t handle it. You would think that losing one son would draw you closer to your other son, but in our case, it did the opposite. Just like with my dad.

Even now, standing directly across from one another, she can’t give me a hug. I honestly can’t remember the last time she or my father touched me. God, I would kill for a hug from my mom right now, to feel that warmth of her body and know she cares about me.

I shake my head to answer her question and bring myself back to the present. “Not really. I think he was here a few days ago, but he didn’t stay,” I tell her, remembering a scribbled note on the counter from my dad about a week ago, just letting me know that he stopped in to trade out his suits. I don’t know what’s going on with my parents and their marriage, and I never ask. Frankly, I don’t care, but I wish that they would just talk to each other, not expect me to be the middleman.

Done talking, I turn and head into the kitchen to make myself another cup of coffee.

She huffs and yells after me, “Be a dear and take my suitcase upstairs for me, please.”

Be a dear? What the hell is that?

My mom is talking and acting like she’s part of some high-society, high-class crowd. We certainly aren’t hurting for money, but we aren’t part of the elite, either.

When my coffee is done, I begrudgingly grab her suitcase and walk it upstairs into her bedroom, mumbling under my breath, “Be a dear and take my suitcase upstairs for me.” With an exaggerated eye roll, I put her luggage on the floor in front of the bed that my parents used to share, walk back to my bedroom, and shut the door behind me.

I’d be lying if I said I didn’t notice that my mom didn’t ask how I’m doing or what I’ve been busy with. She never asks any questions about my life or my interests or my job anymore. She just doesn’t seem to care. I guess the feeling is mutual.

Sometimes I wonder what things would be like if Nate hadn’t died. I wonder if we’d still be a normal family. *What the hell even is a normal family?* I know that I would probably have a home that was warm and welcoming, like it used to be. I know that my brother and I would be close and do things together. I wonder if he’d have a girlfriend or a wife by now? Any kids? Would I be Uncle Dare? I chuckle at the thought. I’d make an awesome uncle.

Taking a large drink of my coffee, I ignore my mother’s presence downstairs and start to get some work done.

The meetings, idea boards, and mock-ups that I have to do today make the day go by quickly. When I feel like I can’t look at any more text or graphics, I log off and take a shower. I haven’t heard anything else from my mom, and I don’t expect to, so I pick up my phone and pull up my social media app.

My first search is Lev. I feel this weird draw to him. The same draw that was there when we were younger. I want to see what he’s been up to, which was my intention last time I looked at this page, but then I got, um, distracted.

I poke around his page and see what he has going on, but there’s nothing really new. He has some pictures of himself and his friends and some of and with his sister, Lindsey. She’s pretty cool. We went to school together, and I remember her always being really down to earth. I like her.

Staring at the pictures and scrolling through, I see Lev smiling, laughing, hanging with a group of friends. I feel like there might be a repeat of the other night as blood flows down to my dick again and I get a semi. But that's quickly snuffed out when I come across the next few pictures.

There's a group of photos of him with some attractive guy, more rugged and sporty than I would define Lev. The man is built but not huge, blond, and has a nice body. I snort when I think there's nothing truly remarkable about him. Petty of me? Maybe. In a bunch of the photos, he's looking at Lev and smiling, often touching his arm or leaning against him, and it feels like this might be a boyfriend. I don't know why I get a weird feeling about that. I haven't seen Lev for years. I don't give a fuck if he has a boyfriend. Glancing through the photos again, I see someone named Seth Divornak tagged in every picture this unimpressively bland blond man is in. Well, *Seth* . . . did you spend some time with my guy Lev? Lucky you.

The rest of the pictures show Lev doing different things and looking good in all of them. Sighing, I put my phone down and throw my head back on the top of my chair, spinning in a few circles. I don't know what I want to do tonight, but I don't want to stay here.

I call Ryan, but he's busy with Katie and can't meet me out. I'm just really antsy. I need something. Or someone.

After hesitating for only a few seconds, I text Lance. He responds quickly, and I get ready to go meet up with him. Not for the first time, I appreciate that Lance and I have an understanding. We both know I'm never staying over. It's a rule I have set so that I don't let myself get attached. I don't stay overnight with any of my hookups. I only stay long enough for us to do our thing and for him to hold me afterward while we watch a movie or something. It's the touching and body contact that I crave, that skin-to-skin cuddling, and right now, Lance is the one who can give it to me.

I'm so damn touch starved, and while I'd rather just cuddle with him without the sex first, I know that'll only happen if we get each other off. So that's what I do.

And it fills a tiny bit of the void inside me. At least temporarily.

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Chapter 11

Levon

"Thank you so much for coming in," I tell a customer, handing him the receipt for the work done on his bike.

The shop is busy, business is great, and I'm really enjoying myself, making the days go by fast at Glenrock Chrome and Tire. I chuckle at how that sounded like a commercial in my head. I really love owning the store, and I feel like things are falling into place. The work is exactly what I want—motorcycles day in and day out—and that lights me up. I get to get my hands dirty and work with customers who love their bikes as much as I love mine.

When the last customer leaves and five o'clock rolls around, I close up for the night and go home to get cleaned up. I'm meeting the guys and their partners at The Copper Exchange again. It's becoming our weekly Friday night meetup. Seeing the guys has been good—another thing that brings some peace and normalcy to me being back in Glenrock.

Walking into the Exchange a while later, I see Caleb sitting on one of the chairs in the back corner of the room. He has a drink on the table, and he's

in an animated conversation with Chris and Nolan, his mop of curls shifting back from his forehead as he throws his head back and laughs.

“Hey, guys,” I say, putting my keys on the table.

“What’s up!” Nolan greets.

“LEEEEVON!” That’s Caleb.

“Hey, man,” Chris says, tipping his beer toward me.

Michelle and Sydney are there, too. They wave at me, and I nod back with a soft “hello.” I smile at my friends and their women, a warming feeling in my chest at the memories I have with these guys.

“I’m going to the bar. Does anyone need anything?” I ask.

They apparently just refilled, so I head to the bar to grab myself something.

Leaning against the counter, I see Garrett, and he puts his finger up as if to tell me to hold on for a moment. I nod and wait for him. He’s talking to a man wearing a work T-shirt with the name of a distillery on it. Once Garrett finishes his conversation with the man, who is probably a distributor, he comes over to me.

“Hey, Lev. Good to see you. Your tonic?” he asks. I nod to Garrett, and he slides a glass over to me. “On the house.”

I thank him and reach for the glass as he continues.

“So listen.”

I freeze and look at him, my stomach dropping at the serious expression on his face.

“Darian was here last night, and he was fucked up. I had to get him out and get him a ride. I think he was bringing his own stuff because there’s no way me or my bartenders would have served him that much.”

I suck in a breath. “That’s a shitty thing for him to do if that’s what’s happening,” I agree.

“Yeah.” Garrett wipes the counter and then tucks the towel in his apron strings behind him. The way it hangs over his jeans it reminds me of a tail. “Dude, when I say he was messed up, I mean it. I cut him off, but it was too late. I got him a car and sent someone with him to be sure he got home okay. I should ban him, but I’m worried if I do, he’ll just go somewhere else and get even more fucked up.” Garrett pauses and sighs, frowning. “I can’t keep doing this, Lev. He’s going to get me in a heap of trouble.”

I get that Garrett’s frustrated, but I suddenly feel protective of Dare. “I’m sure he was just having a bad day, Garrett. We’ve all had a little too much

from time to time."

Garrett shakes his head. "Yeah, we sure do. But Lev, this is more. Remember when I stopped by the shop, and I told you that he was doing this? It's becoming far more frequent than just from time to time, and I can't have it here. I'm worried he's going to take it too far, to a point he won't be able to come back from. We all got messed up when we were kids, Lev. But some of us had boundaries. And those of us who didn't, well . . . hell, that's part of the reason Nate isn't here anymore."

I feel like Garrett just slapped me across the face, and I physically rear back. "Nate isn't not here because we got fucked up a lot." I seethe. *Nate's not here because he got fucked up, and I wasn't there for him. I was busy trying to get into someone's pants.*

"Whatever, man." Garrett waves his hand in the air. "I just don't want to be the one who's feeding Dare the shit that will repeat the cycle."

Before I do or say something I might regret, I turn away. "I need to get back to our friends. Thanks for the drink."

The conversation leaves me unsettled, a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. Garrett is wrong. Nate didn't die because someone gave him too much to drink at a bar (or a party for that matter). He died because of *me*. Because I was out trying to have sex for the first time rather than staying with him at the party. I should've been there to stop him from getting in that car.

If I'd been there, not out chasing ass, he'd still be alive.

I'm caught in the rationalization in my head when Nolan chuckles and leans over the arm of the chair, glancing into the game room. "Look who's here." He takes a swig of his cheap beer and points the bottle toward the pool tables where I make out the image of Dare. *Speak of the devil.*

I can only catch a glimpse of Dare because the rest of the room is blocked by the wall, but it's unmistakably him. Ripped, tight black jeans hug his body. His black boots are laced up to his knees, and he's wearing a black leather jacket over top a dark T-shirt. He's playing pool and moving around the table, jumping in and out of my line of sight.

Strangely, I wish that I could see all of him, the entire time. I don't want the wall there. I don't want my vision of him to be blocked by anything.

After every shot he takes on the pool table, he downs a shot from a tray full of glasses on one of the high-tops near the door. His friend, a little redhead wearing a short skirt and low-cut top, joins him, and they clink

their glasses together. She's handsy with him, and he doesn't seem to mind, wrapping his arm around her waist and laughing into her hair every so often.

"You guys seem to always be here the same nights," Nolan points out, pulling my attention back to him.

I scoff. "I come out here because *you* assholes ask me to. That's all." I try to not turn and look back toward the game room.

Nolan continues. He's relentless. "All I'm saying is that it seems like every time we're here, so is he, hiding in the shadows."

"Hiding in the shadows?" Chris jumps in. "Whatdafuq is that? Like he's some vampire or werewolf shit or something?"

Nolan laughs. "Well, he always wanted to be a Wolf," he says, and the two of them howl.

I sink back into my chair, slightly embarrassed, and the heat in my cheeks deepens as Dare glances into the room, following where the sound is coming from. His eyes meet mine, and a coy smile spreads across his lips. He raises an eyebrow and tips his glass to me, then takes a drink before he turns around and walks out of my view. My stomach flips, and my heart pounds.

A lycan, I think. A little werewolf.

At that moment, several things happen. Nolan and Chris start laughing hysterically at their howl. I roll my eyes and look over to the doorway of the game room again just in time to see Darian grab another one of the glasses and down the shot. Before he can finish, the redhead slams into him, causing him to stumble. He crashes his back into the high-top table, knocking into it so it tips, and as he overcorrects, he falls. He narrowly misses hitting his head on the table. Glasses shatter, and alcohol splashes everywhere. Dare rolls on the floor to his side, landing in the mess. The redhead is laying on top of him, laughing hysterically.

Thankfully, my brain quickly processes what's happening, and I'm up out of my seat heading toward the game room as Garrett curses and throws his towel on the bar.

I put my hand up to Garrett, letting him know I'll handle it, and I walk past him and into the game room, giving him time to grab the mop and bucket to clean up the mess. One of the people from their group of friends leans over and grabs the redhead by the waist, pulling her up. She squeals and kicks her legs as I step in front of her and reach my hand down to Dare,

who’s lying on his back. He looks at my hand, his eyes focusing as they trail up my arm. When our gazes meet, Dare starts to laugh. He’s lying in a puddle of alcohol and who knows what else, and he fucking laughs. Full on, obnoxiously laughs. I take a deep breath and lean lower so he can reach up and take my hand.

He’s still laughing as he lifts his opposite arm and his hand meets mine.

“Come on,” I say, my hand closing around his. Lightning zaps up my arm, and I yank him up, harder than expected. He crashes into me, his body pressing against mine. He’s still laughing. The smell of beer and alcohol is so strong I almost gag. I push him off of me and steady him as Garrett comes through the door with the mop and bucket.

Garrett shoots me an incredulous look. “Get him out of here, Lev.” He’s visibly upset, and he turns to the group still at the pool table. “Anything more from *any* of you and you’re *out*!” He makes a point to look at each of them as he says his piece. They all nod and go back to the game, chalking up the tips of their cue sticks and turning away to have hushed conversation. Garrett brushes the glass off of Dare’s back and legs, mumbling something under his breath.

I realize that I’m still holding onto Dare’s biceps.

“Can you walk?” I ask him.

He stumbles and starts to laugh again, and I sigh and put my arm around his waist. He’s strong and solid against my side. And though he’s much leaner than I am, his body is hard.

That better be the only thing that’s hard over the next few minutes.

“Come on,” I say, starting toward the exit.

I throw a nod to the corner where Nolan and Chris are looking at us wide-eyed. “Get me a water,” I say, as loudly as I can. With my free hand, I signal taking a drink, hoping they know what I’m asking.

Once Dare and I are outside in the brisk fall air, I help him sit in one of the chairs in the outside seating area and then text Chris to be sure someone comes to the door with a bottle of water.

Shortly after I send my text, Chris appears at the door. I meet him there, and he hands me a cold plastic bottle. “You good?” he asks.

I nod and glance back toward Dare. “Yeah. I’ll make sure he gets home safely.” I hold up the water bottle. “Thanks for this, man.”

Chris nods and then heads back into the bar.

Letting out a breath, I walk over to Dare and take the cap off the bottle. “Here,” I say, handing it to him. “Drink.”

He smirks at me as he takes the water. I wish I knew what was so funny. He takes a sip and leans back in the chair. I’m buzzing with nervous energy. My heart’s racing, and my palms are sweaty, and I’m trying to decide what to do with him and how to get him home. I’m not sure that I can trust a rideshare car, like an Uber or Lyft, to get him there, and I’m sure as hell not trusting someone else.

What would he do once he got dropped off? Can he make it into his house? Would someone take advantage of him?

Realizing that I’m going to be the one to have to take him home, I pull my keys out of my pocket. “Let’s go.” I motion him up, slipping my hand under his arm. His clothes are damp from the spilled liquid, but I notice the tightness of his muscles more than the wetness of his clothes. A shiver runs through me at our contact.

Dare gets up and lets me lead him to my car. “Whaddaaare we doin’?” he slurs, his head flopping around loosely on his neck.

“Getting you home safely,” I tell him.

“I’m ffffine,” he murmurs, the *f* in the word drawn out a little bit longer than it should be. He stumbles over his own feet.

“Yeah. You’re fine,” I scoff, holding him tighter to steady him. “Just get in the car.” I open the door and hold his arm as he slides in and slumps down into the seat rather roughly. I shake my head and shut his door. Then I walk around to the driver’s side and climb in.

What am I doing?

I’m immediately met with the smell of stale beer and something else. Whiskey? I don’t know, but it’s strong.

“You stink,” I tell him.

He scoffs. “You stink,” he mimics. “Well youuuuuu smell reeeeallly goooooood.” His head lies against the headrest, and he turns to look at me, those emerald eyes sparkling in the illumination from the lights in the parking lot. He reaches up and rubs his hand down the side of my face, and I bat it away, goose bumps erupting on my arms. I huff a humorless laugh and pull out of the lot.

Thankfully, the drive is short, and I have the windows down both to give Dare some fresh air and to air out the car so it doesn’t smell like a bar tomorrow. As we near the side of town that our houses are in, I ask Dare

where he lives. He confirms that he's still at the house he grew up in, and as he finishes that sentence, he immediately follows with, "Imma throw up."

We're on the back roads now, so I quickly pull over to the shoulder and tell him to open his door. He leans out the side of the car and pukes what seems like everything he had in his stomach for a week. When he's done heaving, he sits back up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He groans.

I hand him the bottle of water again. "Drink."

"Yerrrr so bossy." He takes the bottle and puts it to his lips.

I can't help the smile that tries to spread across my face. I catch a glimpse of the lip ring in his bottom lip, and something stirs inside my groin. His lips are just beautiful. *Oh my god, Lev. Stop.*

I shake myself out of my daze and start down the road again.

Just as we're pulling onto his street, my heart starts thumping in my chest. I didn't clock it until now, but bringing him home means going back into the house where we all used to hang out. The house where my best friend used to live, where I have so many memories of so many good times.

I have no idea what that's going to be like, being hit by everything all at once. I haven't been inside the house since the day after Nate's funeral. And I don't know if I even *can* right now.

Dare pulls me back to reality, announcing that he has to vomit again. I stop the car, and he opens the door, letting another large amount of liquid out of his system.

When he sits back up, his eyes are closed, and his breathing is erratic. "Uhhhhghhhh," he groans, a little cough escaping his lips.

I thought he smelled bad before, but now? Ugh is right.

"Is anyone home, Dare?" I ask.

"Nope." His lips pop on the *p* at the end of the word. "I purrritty mush live herrrrre alooooooone."

Making a decision that I know I will have to justify later, I pass his house and keep going.

"Heyyyy," he drawls. "Daasss my houssssse."

His words are getting quieter, and I can tell he's tired. I can't leave him alone, not when he's puking his guts out and god knows how much he had to drink. I'm sure as hell not going to stay at that house, either, bombarded by memories of Nate and our time as kids. My decision not to return there

all these years has been intentional, and I don't think I'm changing my mind now.

I'll take him to my apartment instead. It's probably a very bad idea, but I don't think I have many other choices at this point.

I pull up to the front of my apartment a few minutes later and cut the engine. "Hold on," I say to him as I get out and walk around to his door.

Of course he doesn't listen, and I have to rush to his side to meet him as he opens his door. He's already trying to get out of the car. He pitches forward, and I grab him under his armpits.

"Woah, woah," I say, helping him get out. My nose brushes into his hair, and I'm filled with the scent of soap and something clean, although he still reeks of vomit and beer as well.

He's laughing again, and I realize it's going to be a long night.

"Come on. Let's go." I help him walk to the apartment, and we head right to the bathroom. He's very unsteady on his feet and a sort of deadweight against me. I pull him a little bit closer.

"Lev," he says, "I'm going to puke again." He rushes ahead of me to the toilet and drops to his knees. Then he continues to empty the contents of his stomach into the bowl.

"Jesus, Dare. How much did you drink tonight?" I ask.

He gets up, and I pull out a toothbrush and some toothpaste from below the sink and hand them to him. While he starts to brush, I grab a towel and washcloth out of the linen closet and set them on the counter.

"The shower has a bench if you think you can safely clean yourself off. I'll wash your stuff."

He spits into the sink and turns his glassy eyes to me, a devious sparkle in them. My stomach squeezes.

"You're gonna washhhhhmy stuffffffff, Lev? My stuff." He pushes his groin forward, and I freeze. "Dewyou want to wash my stuff, Leeeevon?" He swirls his hips in a circle.

"Fuck off, Darian," I say. I can't help the smile that creeps onto my face. "Get in the shower. You need one. You stink."

He looks at me, eyes glazed. "I'm gonna take a showwwwer." I smirk at his obvious statement. "I *do* stink. I think I fell in beer." He hiccups.

I manage a laugh. "You did, you jackass. Be careful in the shower. Throw your clothes out to me when you're done."

He nods, and I shut the door, rubbing my face hard with my hands. Why do I find this all so endearing? I have Darian Archer in my house. He's drunk off his ass, puking his guts out, and he's in my shower. He's getting naked right now, too. He's adorably drunk, sexy and *naked* in my shower. I'd kind of like to see what naked Dare looks like.

Fuck.

No, no, no, no. I will my stirring cock to settle down. *You cannot get hard right now. This is not the time nor the place.*

Just when it seems like I'm going to lose the battle with my stupid, horny dick, I hear the bathroom door open, and a hand shoots out, holding a bunch of black clothing.

"Oh, your clothes," I say, snapping myself out of . . . whatever that was.

I grab the clothes from him. They're still damp, and they smell. Gross. I throw them into the hamper and then go to my drawer and pull out a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt.

"Here," I say to Dare with a little rap on the bathroom door.

He cracks the door open and takes the clothes, then freezes in place for a second, his body still in the bathroom and his arm hanging out the door, holding my sweatpants and T-shirt. I hear the shower water running as he stands on the other side of the door, and my pulse is pounding in my head.

Naked. He's naked.

He mumbles something that might be a "thanks," and the door clicks shut again. I stand there. Just stand there like an asshole for a few minutes, staring at the door like I'm going to be able to see through it or something. I *want* to see through it, and that thought jolts me back to reality.

Shaking my head, I spin around, grab the clothes hamper, and head out of my bedroom to the washing machine. It only takes me a minute to get his clothes into the machine and get it started. Then I make my way to the kitchen to get us both bottles of water. After I close the refrigerator, I have to stop for a minute and take it all in. I stand in my kitchen, my hands on the counter and my arms extended as I hang my head and breathe deeply.

This is so weird, him being here, in my apartment. Maybe it shouldn't be weird—I'm just a friend, helping him out, after all. But it *feels* weird, for whatever reason.

When I hear the water shut off, I fish a couple of pain pills out of a bottle in the kitchen cabinet and head back to the bedroom. Dare's going to have a heck of a headache in the morning.

As soon as I walk into the bedroom, I freeze, and my mouth goes dry. Dare stands in the middle of my room in my sweats and my T-shirt, and he looks . . . fucking adorable. Hot. Sexy, even. The oversized sweats hanging low on his narrow hips, his wet hair starting to curl at the ends, his green eyes sparkling, and his lips—my god, his lips with that black lip ring standing out against his pale skin. He looks *good*, and I have the urge to bite that lip and suck on the ring. He's not normally so pale, but I guess puking your guts out will do that to you.

"L-Lev?" Dare says quietly, breaking me out of my heart-stopping stupor. "You were staring," he says, a smile creeping onto his lips. But he seems to waver, and his face pales. "Hold that thought," he says, and he runs into the bathroom and pukes again.

I sigh and sit on my bed, pushing my hands through my hair on either side of my temples. A moment later, I hear him brushing his teeth, and then he comes out of the bathroom, wiping his eyes and mouth with the towel he used to dry off after his shower.

"You can sleep in the bed. I'll sleep on the couch," I tell him, standing up. "Take these and drink water." I point to the pain relievers on the bedside table and the bottle of water. "I'll be in the living room if you need me."

Dare walks over and crawls into my bed. I grab a pillow and the blanket that's draped off the end of the mattress, and he pulls the covers up over his head.

"The pills, Darian," I say, and he pushes the comforter back.

"Mr. Bossy again," he mumbles, adding, "I like it."

I hope that he doesn't hear my breath catch. Was he flirting? I shake off the feeling and hand the pills to him as he sits up, the tips of my fingers grazing his palm. The touch is warm and tingly, and I don't want to lose it. I close my hand over his and squeeze his fingers down to hold the pills. Dare's lips turn up into what looks like a half smile. I try to ignore what *that* does to me too, and instead, I hand him the water. He rolls his eyes and swallows the pills, then lies back down with a sigh.

I turn to walk out of the room, releasing a ragged breath. I didn't want him to see me fighting the urge to join him in my bed.

When I get to the door, I hear him say, ever so quietly, "Lev?"

I turn around, and just the top of his head and his tired green eyes are peeking out from under the comforter.

“Could you . . .? Can we . . .? Would you mind . . .?” He shakes his head and rolls over. “Never mind.”

Confused, I stay there and watch the lump of his body filling the middle of my bed. For a fleeting second, I consider the thought again that I want to crawl into bed beside him and hold him.

That’s absurd.

He must still feel my presence, and he shifts slightly before he says, “Night, Lev.”

I turn off the light and quietly close the door. “Night, little lycan.”

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Chapter 12

Darian

There's a painfully loud drumline marching in my head, pounding with an uneven beat. My mouth feels like I slept with a wad of cotton balls on my tongue. I roll over and wince. Something isn't right. I stretch and notice that my bed doesn't smell like my bed. It smells different, amazing, like some sort of musk and woodsy scent. I inhale and stretch again, turning my nose to the pillow. This isn't Lance's bed, either. His bed has scratchy sheets. These sheets are soft and smell so good.

Damn, my head hurts.

Where am I?

I crack my eyes open and try to look around the room. Then I slowly sit up, hanging my legs over the side of the bed. I'm in a T-shirt and sweatpants, and neither are mine. There's a bottle of water on the table next to me, and so I take it and have a swig, the crinkle of the plastic making me cringe. I have to pee, and the pounding in my head is making it hard to keep my eyes open.

Standing up carefully, I sway nauseously and lean on the side table for support, swallowing the lump in my throat. There's an attached bathroom just to my left, and I wobble over, using the furniture and wall to stabilize myself.

At the sink, I splash some water on my face and see a toothbrush and toothpaste sitting on the counter. They're not mine, but they look out of place there. Moving over to the toilet to relieve myself, I start to remember bits and pieces from last night. Out at the Exchange. Keira was there. And it was loud and noisy. Pool. We were playing pool. And it was drinking pool, so I must have had a lot because I suck at that game.

I vaguely remember something happening. And then falling. And then I was in Lev's car, and—

Shit.

Shit, I'm at Lev's house. Shit, shit, shit. I tuck myself back into the sweatpants and wash my hands. Then I take a deep breath and head back to the bedside table to grab my phone. It's five thirty in the morning. I can't be here.

Where is *he*?

Did we . . . No, I'd remember that, for sure. I'd be pissed if I was too intoxicated to remember that moment.

My mind is a mess, and my head continues to throb. And all I really know right now is that I need to go. I need to get out of here.

If I'm quiet, maybe I can sneak out, walk home. It's not too far of a walk, and I have no other options, really. It's so early, and I don't want to wake anyone else up.

I don't know where my clothes are, so I quietly open the bedroom door and look around. I hear soft snoring from the couch, and when I stretch up to peek over the edge, I see Lev sleeping there, a blanket thrown over his broad shoulders and his hand resting on his stomach.

With a deep breath, I tiptoe through the living room to the front door near the kitchen. I'm trying to be as quiet as I can, but the door lock makes a snapping sound when I twist it, and I freeze. I can't hear Lev's breathing anymore, so I rip open the door and quickly head outside and down the driveway.

I don't slow down until I'm about a block away. Then I shove my hands into my pockets to keep them warm and trudge on through the cold. Once I finally get home, I immediately jump in my car and head to the diner. I need an egg sandwich desperately. Nothing helps with a hangover more than the diner's egg sandwiches.

Pulling into the diner lot a few minutes later, I easily find a parking space. Given the early hour, the diner isn't busy yet, and that's just how I like it. Once inside, I scan the room and then head to an open seat at the counter. I

lock eyes with the woman standing behind the counter, and she smiles and gives me a nod. Lindsey Richardson is easy to recognize with her purple hair tied back into two pigtail braids. She always looks nice and seems to take pride in that. She's pretty, just like her brother.

I chuckle inwardly at that thought as she sets a coffee mug in front of me.

"Hey, Dare." She gives me another warm smile. "You're here early this morning."

I just left your brother's place almost slips out of my mouth, but I'm not sure that would go over well. So instead, I reply, "I was out last night."

"All night?" She picks up a pot of coffee from the coffee maker next to her, then fills my mug to the brim.

I smirk. "No, not all night." *I was at your brother's.* "Can I have an egg and bacon sandwich?"

"I'll get it right in for you," she says, and she turns and heads toward the kitchen.

I sip my coffee as the diner starts to fill up around me, and when my sandwich comes, I eat it in about four bites. I'm exhausted but feel at least mildly better after having eaten. Tossing some money on the counter, I lift my eyes to see Lindsey looking over, and I point at the cash to let her know I've paid. She nods and waves as I turn and leave.

The drive home is short, but I still feel like shit, and I know what I really need now is to just sleep it off. Last night was fun, but it was a lot; I need to be more aware of my alcohol intake, regardless of whether I'm having a good time.

When I get home, I head upstairs to my room, change into my favorite pajamas, and smoke a joint to calm my stomach. Then I crawl into bed and fall asleep.

Sometime later, I wake, startled. With a groan, I roll over, burying my head in my pillow to try to go back to sleep. But a sound from downstairs rouses me again. It's knocking, like . . . someone knocking on my front door? I push myself up onto my elbows and blink the sleep from my eyes as I glance at my phone, surprised to see it's already early afternoon.

The knocking stops, but I manage to drag myself up out of bed anyway.

As I walk down the stairs and to the front door, I look out the window and see a car I don't recognize pulling away from the curb. Confused, I open the door. My clothes are folded and sitting on the front porch, and there's a brown bag clearly filled with food sitting beside them.

Lev must have dropped them off.

I stare at the clothes and food bag for half a second before I lean down and pick them up. After another glance down the street in the direction the car went, I shut the door and head into the kitchen. The clothes have clearly been freshly laundered, and I shake my head at that as I set them on the table and open the bag.

What the heck?

There's a note sitting on top of a few take-out containers inside the bag.

> *I thought you might need something to eat to feel better.*
> *-Lev*

There's also a phone number on the paper, and I'm sure it's his. Why is Lev giving me his number? And more importantly, why is he bringing me food?

I'm not going to complain, though, because it smells amazing. I pull out the take-out containers, shaking my head at the various cartons of chicken, noodles, and rice, along with a container of wonton soup. The soup is still warm.

Eager to try it, I take some of the soup and pour it into a bowl. I also grab a container of noodles and then take them into the den to watch TV.

The food was apparently exactly what I needed, and I feel so much better with a full stomach of warm food and some water. When I'm finished eating, I take a quick shower and throw on a pair of boxers. Then I sit down at my computer to do a little bit of work, drawing out a few drafts and writing a pitch for a potential client, the Willstorre Group. The design that I do for this client comes together really nicely, and I feel a slight sense of pride as I send it off in an email and then close everything out and lean back in my chair, comfortable but still confused.

Despite all the work I got done in the last while, my head is still stuck on Lev. Apparently, he pulled me out of the bar, took me to his house, and was a complete gentleman. Then I freaked out and essentially took off. Yet he showed up at my house with my clothes, which he'd washed for me, and hot food . . .

If I didn't know any better, I would think he was trying to win me over. That thought makes a weird tingle run down my spine. He used to make me

feel like I mattered when we were younger, and it seems like he's doing the same thing now, whether or not it's intentional.

Against my better judgment, I pull up my social media app on my phone and type in "Lev Richardson" again. There are a few new pictures of him hanging out with Lindsey at their parents' house. I scroll back to some of the older pictures, and dammit if I don't land on the one of him all glistening and sweaty. My dick stirs like it did that first night I saw the picture.

I sigh and lean my chair back more, clicking to enlarge the photo. Lev's blue eyes are staring back at me again, and I bite my lip. *He is really hot.* I remember when I was a kid, Lev was here a lot, hanging out with Nate alone or with Nate and the other guys. If Nate was giving me a hard time, Lev nearly always stood up for me. He protected me. I remember feeling like he thought I was important or mattered. He always had this vibe about him that was so caring and natural.

Of course, I also had a major crush on him. Puberty was just starting for me then, and I was still trying to figure out what I liked and whom I was attracted to. It was a really confusing time for me, but Lev always made the butterflies flutter in my stomach and an excited anticipation to grow when I knew he was coming over. He was just so attractive. Even though Nate was straight, I was always a little bit jealous that he had Lev as his, like they were two halves of a whole.

After switching out of my social media app, I save Lev's number in my phone. Then I type out a text and delete it. I try again and delete it again. Everything sounds stupid. I try again, stare at it, groan, and delete it once more.

I move to my bed and pull the covers up over me, and then I finally decide on something safe and simple.

Me: Thank you for my clothes and food.

I hit send and put my phone down, ready to try to sleep.

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Chapter 13

Levon

Lycan: Thank you for my clothes and food.

Heading out toward the sunroom at my parents' house, I glance at the text from Dare for probably the tenth time today, a smirk working its way onto my face. I know I shouldn't be looking at it right now, not when my parents and sister are around, but I'm obsessed with the way this single text has been making me feel ever since I woke up to it this morning.

It admittedly didn't feel great when Dare snuck out of my apartment the morning before, but I don't know what I expected, really. A nice breakfast together? Maybe a make-out session and a walk hand in hand down by the lake? Yeah, right. I do, however, like the way my heart flutters when I read the text again, and I can easily imagine him saying the words in person, his eyes sparkling and his teeth playing with his lip ring as he grins up at me.

I've always had this innate feeling that I need to protect and care for him, even when we were kids. As Nate's brother, he was around a lot, always trying to tag along and wanting to be a part of what the Wolf Pack was doing.

Nate tolerated it to an extent, but he got a lot more frustrated with Dare than I did, and I remember sometimes having to step in and tell Nate to back off.

I wonder what Dare thought about that then. And I wonder what he thinks about it now, how I tried to be there for him and protect him again. My heart constricts as I realize that I could have handled things differently and maybe kept in touch with him after I left town. With a sigh, I shove my phone back into my pocket and step across the threshold into the sunroom, where Lindsey is sitting, drawing.

Her head bobs side to side, and she's got her earbuds in, so she doesn't even know I'm here. I smile and walk up behind her, smacking her lightly on the head. She lets out a gasp and rips one of the earbuds out, turning around.

"You scared me," she breathes loudly.

I laugh and take a seat on the rocker in the corner of the room. "What are you up to?"

She points to her sketchbook. "Just a few ideas," she tells me. "I got home from work—oh, Dare came in for breakfast yesterday—and I decided to try to draw a few things."

Her voice is muffled, and I didn't hear anything beyond that Dare went to the diner for breakfast yesterday.

"What time?" I cut in.

She squeezes her eyebrows together. "What?"

"You said Dare came in yesterday. What time?" My heart beats loudly in my ears.

"I don't know, Lev," she says on a sigh. "It wasn't long after we opened, so like six? Six thirty? Whyyyyy?"

I rub my face with my hands.

"Lev," she deadpans.

I let it all out in a rush, knowing what she's thinking. "He was at the Exchange the night before, and he got pretty drunk. He was in no shape to drive, and he was puking his guts out, so I didn't want to leave him alone at his house, and I didn't know what time he left because he was gone when I woke up."

She gives me a sly smile that I ignore. "Well, if it helps, he looked kind of . . . peaceful? I don't know. Anyway"—she swishes her hand in the air—"he ate and left and that was that. What's going on with you two?" Lindsey narrows her eyes at me. "You were weird with him when I was with you at the Exchange, and when the guys were busting on you, you got all quiet and broody."

I turn to her. “I do not brood.”

“You so brood,” she snaps back. “But seriously? Is something up?”

I sigh. “No. Nothing is up.” I mock her words. “I’m just worried about him. He lives alone, his parents seem to have forgotten him, and he was really drunk. I would have done that with anyone.”

She gives me the side-eye. “Mmmkay. You know what I think? I think you liiiiiiike him,” she teases.

“I don’t want to know what you think,” I say jokingly.

“What? I know you, Lev, and I know your heart. You like him!”

Our mom picks that moment to come around the corner, carrying a glass of iced tea, which she hands to me.

“Mom!” I don’t think I’ve ever been so grateful to see our mom. “Come and talk.”

Mom glances between both of us, and Lindsey crosses her arms with a smirk, while I take a deep drink of my tea and sit back in my chair.

She’s wrong anyway. There’s nothing going on between me and Dare. I feel for him because his life is shit. I sort of owe it to him, right? Yeah, he’s hot and adorable and creative and probably like a million other things. And I feel incredibly guilty about how things went after we lost Nate, how I moved on and left him here. Clearly I did better leaving and starting over than he did staying here. I should have known better and made some different decisions.

Now that I’m back, I wonder if I could do anything to fix it. I feel like I’m trying. But Lindsey’s teasing voice is in my head, and I’m wondering if maybe there *is* actually something happening here.

When I head home after hanging out with my family, I try to fill the night with things that will get my mind off of the conversation with Lindsey. I change my sheets, do some laundry, wash the dishes, and get into bed to watch something. It’s not until partway through the TV show that I finally pull out my phone and send a text to Dare.

Me: I hope you had a good day and that you feel better.

I see the three dots move and stop. They start again and stop. My heart is beating faster than normal. The dots start again.

Lycan: I had a decent day. The food really helped yesterday. Thank you for doing that.

Me: You’re welcome. Busy week ahead?

I want to try to pull him into a conversation. I want to talk to him. For real. Even if Lindsey’s wrong, which she totally is, I can’t deny that I *am* drawn to Dare, whatever that means.

Lycan: Sort of? What about you?

Me: Nothing out of the ordinary but I have an early start at the garage tomorrow.

The dots move and stop. Move and stop. Move and, finally, another message comes through.

Lycan: Get some sleep. In that comfortable bed. And thanks for making sure I was okay. It was nice.

Smiling, I set my alarm and then put my phone down on the bedside table. I let my mind wander.

Would I be open to something with Dare?

There’s something about him that intrigues me, and it’s more than me just feeling guilty for leaving him behind. He’s a good-looking guy. He’s funny and talented. Maybe we *could* be something. But, of course, that would require him feeling the same way, and I have no idea whether we’re at all on the same page.

Curling up under the covers, I allow myself to indulge in some fantasies about what it would be like to be with Dare as a partner, a boyfriend. I fall asleep quickly with a dumb-ass grin on my face.

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Chapter 14

Darian

We'd like to extend an offer to you to join us in a venture of advertising and promotion. We have noticed your work and would like to ask that you send us your portfolio and a mock-up of something related to our vision and goal.

The email from the PharmCon HR department goes on to explain timelines and expectations. If I land this project, it would be my biggest contract yet, both in terms of pay and status. Getting my name out into the industry and giving me recognition as the ad and marketing materials person for such a large company would be a huge step up in my career.

I vaguely know the company, so I do some searching on the web to get more information about them and what their vibe is. They are a multilayered business with pursuits in pharmaceutical sales, production and medical billing. The head of the company seems to be kind of inflexible, but office event pictures and photos of the staff seem to indicate the company overall has a rather chill vibe.

Ideas start floating around in my head, and I dive right in.

It’s probably several hours later when my stomach growls, pulling me away from my work. I glance down at the clock in the corner of my computer screen and see that it’s nearing dinner time. I save my work for the day and check my emails one last time before shutting down my computer and standing up to stretch. Then I head into the kitchen, take the rest of the food Lev left me out of the fridge, and put it in the microwave. It’s still just as good as it was when it was fresh, and I finish quickly.

Looking out through the windows as I do my dishes, I feel a familiar pull, and I hurry to stick my silverware in the dishwasher before heading outside for some fresh air. The weather tonight is very fall-like, a gentle breeze and a slight chill in the air. The leaves are changing, and the sky has a gray undertone that looks like rain. I walk through the backyard and across the field, and it’s not long before I come to my favorite place.

The lake. It’s not far from my house, and I go there a lot when I need to relax. Nate, Lev, and I used to jump off the dock and swim here when we were little. I have so many memories here, all of them good, and I refuse to let the grief of losing my brother cloud those memories. The lake is peaceful, and I really love coming here. Even now, even with all these memories and knowing what I lost, it’s always been somewhere that can quiet my mind and make me feel like myself again, no matter what’s going on in my life.

I spent so much time here after Nate died, too. I like to come and sit on the dock, watch the sunrise if I have had a night of little to no sleep or watch the sunset if I’ve had a stressful or morose day. The ripples in the water hold so many of my personal thoughts and secrets.

Tonight, the geese and ducks are out on the lake, floating and squawking at one another. A duck plunges his head under the water, and I chuckle as his ass points straight up into the air before he comes to the surface again. Sitting on one of the few docks around the lake, I take out a joint to have a smoke.

Nights like this are both some of my favorite nights and some of my worst nightmares. The stillness of the lake, the chill in the air, and the crushing reality that I am very much alone. My mind and heart roam as I lie back on the dock and look up to the gray sky.

In the lake, there’s splashing and rustling, and after a bit, I sit up and watch a few ducks chasing each other and scooting through the water. I wonder if they are a family. I wonder how the little ducks feel when the parent ducks leave them and move on to something else. Do their feelings get hurt like mine do? Do they wonder why they weren’t good enough for their parent ducks to stay around?

I linger there in the peace and relative quiet for a while, smoking and taking in the air and sounds around me, my mind still going back and forth between the ducks, Nate, Lev, and my parents. When it starts to get too cold for me, I head back home.

After I finish my nightly routine, I crawl into bed. My phone pings, and I pick it up.

Lev: Hey. I wanted to see how your day was.

I smile at the tingle in my chest, but I also think it's odd that he's reaching out to me like this.

Me: Hey yourself. It was okay.

Lev: That's good. What did you do?

I chuckle and scoot down farther into bed.

Me: I worked. Ate. Took a walk down to the lake.

The three bubbles bounce, so I know he's writing something.

Lev: That's cool. Do you spend a lot of time at the lake? I know we used to as kids.

A warmth spreads through me at the fact that he remembered.

Me: Yeah. I try to go as much as I can.

I see the bubbles working again, but then they stop. They work again and stop. I think he's going to write something profound. Nope.

Lev: That's cool. I have to check it out. I haven't been there for a long time. Well, sleep well, Darian.

I chuckle because sleeping well doesn't happen often. But I won't tell him that.

Me: Thank you. Same.

I settle into the covers again and put my phone on the side table. I don't know what Lev's angle is here or what he's hoping to accomplish, but I won't

pretend that the little bit of attention from a good-looking guy—particularly Lev—isn't exciting. I kind of like it. Okay, I like it a lot.

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Chapter 15

Levon

As my Thursday workday draws to an end, my uncle and I get through all of our orders and help a few walk-ins with whatever they need. I have an urge to get outside and enjoy the weather, ride a little, and I have an idea.

I say good night to my uncle and climb onto my bike. Then I take off down the road, letting the gorgeous fall air hit me as I maneuver the bike around the curves and down the hills. New York will get hit hard for winter, but this is my favorite time of the year to be out and riding. Now that the sun has started to set, it's a little cooler, but it's still gorgeous.

After riding a bit through town, I pull over at a local sandwich shop, cut the engine, and reach into my pocket to take out my phone.

Me: Hey.

I wait a few minutes until I see a response being typed.

Lycan: Hey yourself.

Me: You busy?

Lycan: Not really. What's up?

For some reason, my heart is beating out of my chest.

Me: I'm at Hal's Hoagies to grab some dinner. I was going to go to the lake. Want to join me?

There's a pause, and I suddenly feel extremely self-conscious and stupid. Why would Dare want to hang out on a random Thursday—

Lycan: Give me twenty minutes and I'll meet you there.

I suck in a deep breath, pocket my phone, and remove my helmet to head into Hal's. As I'm walking into the sandwich shop, I realize I didn't ask Dare what he wanted. There's a line, like always, so I have some time to figure out what to do. When it's finally my turn, I order two Italian hoagies, a bag of chips, and two bottles of water. Italian hoagies seem like a safe bet; everyone likes them, so it should be okay.

Outside again, I secure the food and water bottles in my backpack and get on my bike. It's only about a fifteen-minute ride to the lake, and as I pull into the loading area, the sun is starting to set, casting rays of light across the water. The sky is turning beautiful shades of orange and yellow, and though there's still plenty of sunlight, it won't be long before it's dark.

As I cut the engine, my eyes land on the form of a man sitting on the end of the dock. The breeze is making his hair blow, and a puff of smoke leaves his lips. He turns his face to me. I'm still far enough away that I can't see the details, but it's obviously Dare. The hair on the back of my neck stands up as goose bumps erupt on my arms and neck. Maybe it's a little bit more chilly than I thought.

I shake my head and then remove my helmet and walk toward the dock.

When I get to the edge, Dare scoots back a little bit. I stand for a moment and just drink him in. He's dressed in all black—ripped jeans, a black shirt under his black leather jacket—though he's taken off his black boots, his pale feet and toes dangling just above the water. I smirk to myself when I see the black polish on his toenails. He has a style that just does something to me. It's so unique and seems to suit him so perfectly, and it's completely sexy. It's so different from the boy I used to know.

My eyes move up his body, lingering for a moment on the chains hanging off his jacket and the small spikes on the tops of the sleeves where they meet his shoulder. I finally reach his face, and he's looking at me, perplexed. I clear my throat, and he smiles, pulling his lip ring into his mouth and letting it back out while licking his lips in the process.

God. This man is dangerous.

He makes my heart stutter and my throat go dry. I haven't had feelings like this for a long time. I want to know everything there is to know about him, and that realization unlocks almost immediately. I should stay away from him. Lord knows I've done enough damage in his life.

But Dare has something special about him, a draw that seems to make me need to be in his orbit. I feel different when I'm near him. Warmer and curious.

I take a few deep breaths as I approach him, and I clear my throat again, then sit down, opening the backpack.

"I wasn't sure what you wanted, so I got Italian hoagies. Hope that's okay." I pull the sandwiches out of my bag and give one to him. Then I open the chips, set the bag between us, and hand him a water. He thanks me, taking it from my hand. "Well, it's a hoagie here," I continue, "but in Sheltonville, they were 'subs.' Everyone called them subs. *Hey man, let's get some subs*."

He doesn't respond right away. Instead, he puts his sandwich down on the dock and unwraps it, and I do the same. I tuck all the meat and toppings into the roll and make it as compact as possible, then lift it and take a bite. It's good. I chew and look over at Dare, who's also taken a bite out of his sandwich, but he's looking out over the lake.

He shakes his head a little. "Subs." He chuckles. "Subs?"

"You should have heard them busting on me in Sheltonville when I said hoagie the first time. They looked at me like I had another arm."

Darian laughs, and it's a beautiful sound that makes me smile.

"Sub," he says under his breath, shaking his head again. "That's so weird."

We sit in silence for a while, the only sounds the occasional crunching of chips and crinkling of napkins as we wipe our hands and faces. When he's through with part of his sandwich, Dare finally speaks.

"So your bike is nice."

I glance over at him, aware of my heart beating hard in my chest. At least this is a topic I'm always willing to talk about. "Thank you," I say. "I really love riding. There's just something about it."

"I've never been," Dare admits.

It doesn’t surprise me. Outside of Garrett, I was the only one out of our friend group who had an interest in motorcycles when we were growing up, and I know my interest is because of Uncle John.

“You’re missing out,” I tell Dare. “It’s just . . . there’s nothing like it.” I consider taking him for a ride, but I’m not sure how he would be with that right now, so I decide against it. “One of these days, I’ll get you out with me.” He doesn’t say anything, but I see curiosity in his eyes. We sit in silence for a little bit more. Finally, I say, “What did you do today?”

Almost as if my voice startles him, Dare jerks and turns to me. “Ha. Nothing, really. I worked.”

I nod and wonder if this is all I’m going to get from him. This Dare is very different from Drunk Dare a week or so ago.

“You’re in graphic design, right?” I ask, trying to carry the conversation.

He nods and takes a chip. I watch it as he slides it over his lips and into his mouth. Then he starts to chew. I suddenly feel like I’m staring at him, so I look out at the lake.

“That’s cool. Do you like it?” I suddenly feel almost . . . shy. I don’t consider myself a shy person, so this sort of comes as a shock to me that I’m struggling to get words out and talk to him.

Dare must have the same thought I do because he chuffs and then says, “Yeah. I do. It’s a cool profession. And it’s really tough sometimes.” He goes on to explain to me that he hasn’t been doing this job for a long time, just over two years. “I’ve always liked to draw, and I really like the fact that you can take a blank sheet or screen or whatever and have a finished . . . thing there that you created.” He gets a soft smile on his face, and I can tell that he really enjoys it. “I think I still have a lot to learn,” he says. “There are plenty of people out there who have done much more and have way more talent than I do.”

“I really doubt that,” I tell him.

“No, no,” he continues. “They have larger portfolios and bigger clients. They went to big universities, got big-shot art or design degrees, and I just took online classes on my own time, and I’m still sort of new to the field.”

A shadow falls over his face. “When I was in high school, my art teachers always enjoyed my work and thought that I had potential. But isn’t that what they tell all of the students? I doubt they are going to look at a kid and be like, *Your work sucks*.”

We laugh at that, but maybe some of the teachers would? I’m glad no one dampened Dare’s enthusiasm for his art and designs.

“Anyway, after I graduated, I started just really putting myself out there. I started with a few small contracts and then took a few much bigger clients, and I’ve been doing pretty well since then. It helps that I don’t have much going on and can spend a lot of time working to get better with my art and my ideas. It’s the one part of my life that I feel like I have some control over, and I enjoy it.”

He releases a shallow sigh and takes a drink of water. “It’s competitive. There are a lot of us and only so many jobs to go around. You have to fight for it sometimes, and I know I’m not the best or most talented artist out there, so sometimes it gets hard being rejected over and over. Sometimes you feel like you’re not good or talented enough, and I’ve really had to learn how to not let it get to me and take it personally.”

I let what he says marinate a little. “I’m sure that can be rough,” I reply. “Especially when you’re proud of your work and someone doesn’t see it.” I remember Dare was always drawing as a kid, always sketching and making graffiti doodles on his notebooks. “I’d also bet that you’re pretty good at it.”

He laughs. “Well thank you for the vote of confidence, but I know that I’m not. Like I said, I don’t have the formal training, so I stick to the smaller contracts and personal businesses. It works.”

It pains me that he doesn’t think more highly of himself. “I remember your parents used to have your work hanging up around the house. And you used to share some of your work with me. It was good, Dare.”

Dare wraps the leftover half of his sandwich in the paper and tucks it in his crossover bag, which is black like his clothing and decorated with pins and patches that I would love to take a closer look at some time. I’m momentarily distracted by the black polish on his nails and then his hands, which look soft—a contrast to the thick silver rings he has on several of his fingers.

I’m staring again. I can’t seem to stop doing that.

He clears his throat, breaking me out of whatever trance I was in. “I’m actually bidding on a really big contract right now. It’s been a challenge, but I feel good about it. And I really hope I get it. It could boost my name and product a lot.”

“That’s great. I hope you land it. I’m sure your work is just as amazing as everyone who is bidding. I know you have a great chance.” I give him a half smile.

He laughs, but his smile doesn’t last. A darkness falls over his face and eyes.

“Yeah. Thanks. So, I’m going to go.” He stands up, brushes off his pants, and then picks up his bag and his boots and socks. “Um, thanks for dinner,” he says. “This was cool. See ya, Lev.” Without looking at me, he turns and walks down the dock.

Then he gets into his car and drives out of the loading area, heading toward his house, and I’m just sitting here like an asshole staring at where his car disappeared around the bend in the road.

What the fuck just happened?

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Chapter 16

Darian

I'm shaking. Full-on shaking, my whole body. I couldn't stay there for one more second, not after that. My car seems too far away, and by the time I get there and climb in, my heart is racing and I'm lightheaded and nauseous.

Fuck.

Why did he have to sound so *nice* about everything? Like . . . like I was a fucking charity case. I'm such a fool. Lev isn't interested in *me*. He just feels bad about what happened with Nate, and he thinks he has some restitution to pay or something. The texts, the food, the invitation to meet at the lake tonight . . . it was all just fucking charity.

I lower my head to the steering wheel for a second, trying to push away the pain and despair. But I just feel sick. I take two long, deep breaths, start the car, and put it in drive. I only allow myself a brief glance in the rearview mirror as I drive off, and my chest tightens as I see him sitting on the dock, wide-eyed and unmoving.

I’m an idiot. He doesn’t fucking care about me. He just wants to “fix” me, like everyone else. And I’m not going to be someone’s project. That’s not what I want or need. I just want some company. I want someone to do things with and talk to and share my interests with. Lev’s familiar. I thought it would be fun. I want a friend. Not someone who thinks he owes me because of my fucking brother.

It doesn’t take me long to get home, and I pull the car into my driveway and turn it off. I open the door and climb out, replaying the last hour or so in my head as I walk up to the front door.

Fuck him for looking so good.

The moment he pulled up into the parking lot on that bike of his . . . damn. He’s freaking hot. But not only that. I really liked talking to him. My dick stirs as I’m reminded of the sweetness of his words and all the kind things he said to me. My double-crossing dick. I’m mad and still frustrated, yet my dick wants what it wants, the traitorous thing.

Sighing, I strip off my clothes and head to the shower. I let the hot water trickle down my face, down the muscles of my shoulders and back, and over the curve of my ass. I soap up and try to let myself focus on how angry I am. Yet my dick continues to stay hard. I turn so the spray hits my back and soap up my hand. The only way I’m going to get any sleep is to jerk off and get rid of this hard-on.

Closing my eyes, I picture myself on top of Lev, straddling his hips as my ass grinds against his dick. My cock is rock-hard now, and I grip it tightly, moving my hand up and down, pumping myself. I feel my balls start to tighten as I envision myself sliding up Lev’s broad chest and shoving myself into his mouth, his beautiful lips wrapping around my cock. I grip myself harder. I imagine fucking his face, hitting the back of his throat and hearing him gag and cough. With a moan, I fuck my hand faster, wishing it was his mouth. God, I would love to see his dimple while he hollows his cheeks to take me deeper. I squeeze my eyes closed tightly and start murmuring his name as I thrust my hips forward, the side of my hand hitting my pelvis as I pound my cock.

“Yeah, Lev. Take it just like that. Suck me off, baby. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

I brace one arm on the wall of the shower. My dick pulses, and jets of cum shoot out, hitting the shower wall and floor. I milk myself until there’s nothing more coming out of me. My breathing is heavy and rapid, and I rest

my forehead against the cool tile to come down from the high of the strong orgasm.

Eventually, I let go of my dick and wash my hands, then I turn off the water and get out. I wrap a towel around my waist.

With my hand, I clear a streak of steam from the heat of the shower off the mirror, and I barely recognize myself as I stare at my reflection. My cheeks are flushed from the hot water and my moment with myself and Imaginary Lev. I have no idea why he makes me feel like he does. I just know I really enjoy Lev's company and the way he looks at me. There's something about him that draws me in. It always has.

I pick up my toothbrush and start brushing, trying to push my thoughts in a different direction. But they stubbornly want to stay on Lev.

I don't think I have a "type" where men are concerned, but if I did, maybe it would be Lev. He has similar hair and eyes as Lance, so maybe that's part of my "type" too. But that dimple Lev has . . . it doesn't even allow Lance in the same category.

Spitting into the sink, I chuckle to myself and shake my head. I rinse my toothbrush and my mouth and turn off the water and then the light. I pull on a fresh pair of boxers and use the towel to get my hair as dry as I can. After tossing the towel into the hamper, I grab a drink and crawl into bed.

It takes a while for me to fall asleep, more thoughts of Lev circling in my head. Am I overreacting? Is he really just a nice guy? Could he be interested in some kind of relationship? I convince myself how ridiculous that is because he was nothing but a crush to me as a kid. He was also Nate's best friend, and he's just trying to be nice and probably feels sorry for me. With a sigh, I pull the covers up over my head.

It's nights like these where my body aches for another warm body against me. It literally hurts, a gnawing feeling that doesn't seem to go away. Nothing I do seems to satisfy it, and I'm kicking myself for even wishing I could have something like that on a consistent basis. I want someone against me, holding my hand, feeling their lips on my neck and gentle touches all over my body. God, I want it . . . No, I need it. I feel pathetic and stupid for even thinking that maybe Lev would be the one to eventually give me that. My body aches for touch, but I have nothing.

So I do what I've learned to do and shove it down, rolling over and trying to go to sleep.

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Chapter 17

Levon

"I mean, Lev—there was like, dressing and red sauce and *garlic butter* all over them!" Lindsey's eyes are wide as she recounts a moment when her coworker dropped a tray of food on one of the tables last night. "I felt so bad, and the customers were shocked."

"I bet," I say, laughing along with her as I pull into the parking lot of Giuseppe's, an upscale Italian place in Cedar Grove, the next town over.

We haven't hung out just the two of us in a while, and I know she loves to be served and pampered a little bit, since she's usually the one providing the service. I'm happy to take her out for some one-on-one time. I also haven't heard anything from Dare since a week ago at the lake, and I'm frustrated about that. He hasn't responded to any of my texts, and trust me, I'm trying. I thought a night out with my sister could help put that into perspective.

I'm trying to pay attention and be engaged with what she says, but I still can't figure out what happened the night at the lake. I'm truly at a loss. I know Dare has a lot going on with the project he was talking about, so I assume he's working. I also know he has friends that he hangs out with, so

maybe he's just busy. I wonder if he's seeing someone. I didn't even consider that, and I don't know why the thought gives me a weird sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. He was pretty up close and personal with the guy at the bar a few weeks ago.

And actually, I *do* know why I feel this way. Because regardless of who he is or what he stands for, there's something about Darian Archer that I'm attracted to. Maybe I shouldn't be. Maybe knowing that I blame myself for not being there for Nate the night he died has given me a soft spot for the brother he left behind. But whatever it is, I can't stop thinking about Dare, even though he's so outside of my normal type and my comfort zone.

It's busy when we head inside, but we're seated and have our drinks already ordered in just a few minutes. Lindsey grabs a roll from the bread basket on our table, rips a piece off, and shoves it into her mouth. "So," she says through the bread, "what's new?"

I chuckle at my sister. "The shop is doing really well, and I love it there, Linds. I have so many ideas that I want to do to make the space better and more functional. I really want to bring in more of the younger twenty-something crowd, so I'm working on some ideas as to what I could do for them. I just haven't solidified anything yet."

She listens intently and only pulls her gaze from me when the server, whose name tag says ***Julian***, comes over to our table. He's tall and built, eyes a gorgeous chocolate brown that look like hot cocoa. I'm definitely checking him out, but it's immediately clear that he doesn't have eyes for me. Nope. He's caught up on my sister. And she's giggling like a twelve-year-old.

I clear my throat to break up their conversation, and then we finish ordering our meals. As he gathers our menus and walks away, he throws a wink at Lindsey. We watch him go over to the terminal and put our order in, and then he disappears into the kitchen. I turn my eyes to my sister, and her cheeks are crimson.

"What?" she asks before taking a big gulp of her drink.

I laugh, throwing a sugar packet at her. "He's cute. Get his number," I tease.

"Lev, I leave in a few months. I can't be just starting something now!"

"Linds, no one said you had to marry the dude. Just get his number and have some fun." Right when that last sentence leaves my mouth, Julian

arrives back at our table, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

Julian smiles brightly at me and then at my sister. She's beet red and refuses to make eye contact with him. He sets our food down and asks if there's anything else we need, and we both give him a quick "no, thank you."

"Oh my god, Lev!" she exclaims when he leaves. "You're so . . . embarrassing!" She's laughing, though, and I know this is how my sister is. Deep down, she loves that he heard it, and if she has her way, she'll be leaving here tonight with Julian's number.

We dive into our food and eat for a few minutes in silence before Lindsey asks, "So, anything new on the dating front?"

I shake my head and pick up my drink.

"How's Dare?" she asks innocently.

I sputter, choking on my water. "Not cool, Lindsey," I say, putting the glass down. I clear my throat. "What are you even talking about?"

Lindsey teases that she talked to Katie, who told her that Ryan said Dare hung out with me at the lake the other night. I have to take a deep breath because I can't believe he told someone about it. That has to mean it wasn't just nothing to him, right?

My sister can obviously tell that my thoughts are racing in circles. "What happened at the lake, Lev?" she asks, playfully wiggling her eyebrows before taking another bite of her dinner and chewing dramatically.

"Nothing happened at the lake, Linds," I answer, my voice clipped. She stares at me with a raised eyebrow, urging me to go on and unfazed by my tone. "I texted him to see if he wanted to meet me there for dinner. I grabbed some sandwiches from Hal's, and we met on the dock off of Spruce Street. We ate and talked about his work and stuff. And then he left."

"He left, or you both left? Like it was over and he left, or you pissed him off and he left?" She looks confused.

A sudden burst of frustration hits me. The same frustration I felt the night at the lake. It comes out in my answer to Lindsey. "*He* left. I don't know what the fuck happened, but we were talking and eating, and he just packed up his stuff and was like, see ya. Not a word since. I've texted him like five times, and I haven't heard anything from him since."

"Hmmm." Lindsey's brow furrows. "What were you talking about? Did you bring up Na—"

“No, I didn’t bring up Nate,” I cut in. I drop my hand onto the table, and it hits the surface a lot harder than I wanted it to, causing the silverware to rattle. I wince. “Sorry.” I don’t know why I’m getting so irritated about this.

She sighs loudly, rolling her eyes.

“Sorry,” I repeat. “We were talking about his work, and I told him I bet he was good at what he did, and he got all weird and left.”

She picks up her water and takes a sip. “That’s strange, no?”

I give her a look confirming that yes, I do think it’s strange.

“Okay. Maybe he just got uncomfortable with something that was said, or maybe he remembered he needed to do something, or maybe being around you is too weird or difficult for him. You bring a lot of . . . stuff back to him, you know?” She pauses a minute. “Lev, do you like him?” Her eyes soften as she looks at me.

I run my hand over my face. “I don’t know, Linds. I’m so intrigued by him. He’s different from anyone I’ve ever been interested in. He’s the polar opposite of Seth, and just by his style and looks alone, he pulls me in. You know the guys I dated were not all dark and goth and . . . whatever he is. Seth was always crisp slacks and polos, and the guys before him were very similar. Dare is so different.”

She continues with a sigh as she flops back into her chair. “Just be careful, please. I know you get mad at me when I say this, but you don’t need to save him. I love you, and I know we can both see his pain. But if you get to know him better, do it for the right reasons.”

Julian the server comes by then with the check and puts it on the table, eyes only on my sister. He smiles and taps the black server book. “Let me know if you’re interested in going out sometime. My number is on the check.”

Lindsey’s cheeks burn again, turning about three shades redder than normal. I chuckle and reach for the bill.

A few minutes later, after we made it back to the car and buckled up, I finally pick up our conversation again.

“I literally saw him a few times and texted him a bit,” I say. “There’s nothing going on with us.”

She nods and leans her head back against the headrest. “Okay.”

And that’s the end of the conversation. I wish it was that easy for it to be out of my head, but as we get to our parents’ house and settle into watching a movie, Dare’s black nail polish, emerald-green eyes, and tantalizing lip

ring keep passing through my head. By the time I get home late that night, I'm antsy and restless. We've had such little contact and spent so little time together, yet I feel like Dare already has a hold on me.

And I can say with certainty now that I don't want him to let go.

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Chapter 18

Darian

Dear Mr. Darian Archer,
Thank you for your submission to . . .
We appreciate your ideas . . .
Unfortunately, they are not exactly what we were looking for . . .
We have decided to forgo the potential bid from you. We hope to work wi you more in the future.

My eyes scan down the screen, and my stomach sinks. Yeah, that's it. I didn't get the contract. Nothing more I can do.

They decided to go with someone else. All that work for nothing. Sometimes I wonder if this job is worth it. Or, rather, I wonder if it's worth going after the bigger projects. Especially when I get rejections like this. Sure, landing a big project would potentially be a gateway to more success and more money, but the time I put in, drafting logos, business cards, stationary, stickers, and promo and marketing materials, only to have nothing come of it, was so much.

Just like with my parents and many of the people in Glenrock, it feels like my time isn't worth people's investment. Maybe I'll stick to smaller, less time-consuming bids from now on. Freelance is no joke. I know that's the business, but it hurts.

Much like the conversation I had with Lev the other day.

I haven't reached out to him since that night at the lake. It's not that I don't want to. I just don't know what I would say. I can't put myself out there and be hurt by him again.

Fuck all of it. I'm ready to unwind and kiss this week goodbye.

I take a few hits of my joint and start to get dressed to meet my group of friends that I like to hang out with on the weekends. Ryan and Katie won't be there because they went away for the weekend, and I haven't heard from Lance, so I don't know if he's going to be there or not. If he is, we'll most likely leave together. I could use some time with him more than ever now.

As I pull on my long-sleeved, deep-purple Henley, I'm caught off guard by the thought of bright-blue eyes and dusky-blond hair. Will Lev be there tonight, too? I sit on the bed and put on my black canvas pants that are already holding various silver chains and patches. Then I slip on and lace up my knee-high black boots.

All the while, I can't get Lev out of my head, and my stomach flutters at the thought that maybe he *will* be there.

I check myself in the mirror. My silver chains and dog tag fall right at my sternum, matching the glint of my silver earrings and black hoop lip ring. I slide on my long fishnet gloves, tuck my phone under my arm, and snuff out my joint just as my phone lights up with a text from one of my friends, Marcus. He's apparently outside, waiting for me. With a final glance at my reflection, I head out to meet him at his car. Then he drives us to The Copper Exchange.

Marcus comments how busy the place is as we circle the main lot a few times before he ends up parking on the grass beside it. I can hear the music and feel the hyped-up energy before I even go inside. A blast of warm air meets me as I open the door and step in.

Scanning the room, I see some of my friends in the back, already playing pool. The speakers overhead blast an upbeat rock song from a few years ago through the room, and it's enough to help calm some of my nerves. My eyes go to the corner of the room where I saw Lev last time, but he doesn't seem to be here tonight. At least not yet.

Marcus and I meet our friends in the back game room. The group is mainly friends from high school. Keira and Marcus are the ones I really like hanging out with; they both have a style similar to mine. We all like to drink, laugh, and have a good time. There are zero expectations with this group, and I can just be me. It's refreshing.

Once we get settled, I order a drink from the server, and we play a few rounds of pool and wait for the dartboard to be available. The group of guys at the table near the dartboard seems to be spending most of the time on darts. As the hours pass, they get louder. A few times, we catch them looking our way and talking, then turning back to the darts and laughing. I try not to bother with them or let what they're doing bother me, but they get more and more obnoxious. My friends and I are also getting more drunk and feeling a bit bold.

Finally, Keira decides that she's had enough. She walks over to them to ask if we can have some time with the dartboard. The rest of us stand by our table and watch. The loudest of the guys takes a swig of his beer and slams it down on the table, shaking his head and waving his hand in a dismissive motion as though telling her to leave. She shakes her head in frustration, muttering something under her breath, and starts to walk away. He reaches out and smacks her ass so hard she's forced forward, letting out a surprised yelp. He grips her butt cheek, even as she tries to scoot away from him.

I. SEE. RED.

No one should be disrespected like that, and the fact that it was one of my friends strikes a nerve.

"Oh fuck no," I shout.

I storm over immediately and get in his face, yelling, telling him to get his hands off of her. (I may have used some more choice words.) The man laughs, turning back to his friends. I move Keira behind me and step up to him. The tool that he is thinks he can intimidate me, pushing forward until we're chest to chest.

"I don't know why *you* would care if I grab that nice piece of ass or not," he sneers.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I ask him, crossing my arms across my chest. I know exactly what he's alluding to. I just want to know if he has the audacity to say it.

He laughs loudly. "Look, pretty boy." He steps even closer, and I'm accosted by his hot, beer-scented breath. "We all know you eat corn on the

cob the long way." He follows that statement with a homophobic slur directed at me as he bumps his chest into mine.

I snap. I shove him, and pandemonium erupts. There are fists and elbows and bodies everywhere. Something connects with my cheek, and the pain is immediate. My fists hits faces and body parts and I think maybe a chair? I take a fist or elbow to the mouth, too, before I land a nice right hook into whoever did it. Someone connects another fist with my ribs, and I bend at the waist, trying to suck in a breath. I stand up again quickly and land an elbow in another person's chin.

Suddenly, I'm hauled backwards, ripped off of someone I had gotten by the shirt and was punching in the face. I'm thrown backward, my shoulder slamming hard into the solid wall. A bar back pins me so I can't move.

Everything is warped and nothing makes sense. The sound around me is muffled, my eyes are burning, and my head is pulsing with every heavy breath. Then, before I can process what's happening, I'm outside in the cold. My knuckles are burning, and my face is on fire. Something's dripping from my nose, and I touch my fingers to the skin above my lip. It's wet. I see blood when I pull my hand away. I check my lip ring, and it's in place, but my lip is busted in the middle, blood on my chin. I start pacing, clenching and unclenching my inflamed knuckles, my breathing heavy as I watch a few of my friends being dragged out as well.

"Sit the *fuck* down."

My friend Tim is thrown into a chair, followed by Marcus. Tim has blood on his lip, and his shirt is ripped.

Keira, the girl who was just assaulted, comes out in tears. Her eyes connect with mine, and she smiles tightly at me as she walks closer. Then she stops and touches my arm. She gives me a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you," she says. I nod to her and squeeze her arm. "Oh, Dare!" Her eyes go wide. "You're hurt. Oh my god, you're bleeding!"

I sniffle and wipe more of the blood away from my nose and lip. "I'm okay. Really. Are you?"

She nods and thanks me again. "Yeah, that guy's a real dick."

Some of her friends join us, and they all thank me, too, before they get in a car and leave.

Garrett marches over from where he was talking with one of his staff members, his eyes full of anger. "Seriously, Dare. What the hell??" He runs his hand through his hair.

I glare at him.

“You better talk fast before I call the fucking cops and get all of you thrown into jail tonight!” He moves his hand in a circular motion, indicating to me and all of my friends who are still here. “I’ve talked to you about this, man,” he says a little more quietly, his shoulders sagging with what seems like defeat.

I stop pacing and glare at him again. “The guy assaulted my friend,” I say, my voice as steady as I can get it. I point to the empty space where Keira was just standing a moment ago. “He grabbed her ass, and I stood up for her.”

“And he was a homophobic piece of shit,” Tim yells from his seat. He lights up a cigarette and takes a deep drag as Garrett turns to face him. “He called Dare a fucking slur.” Tim’s sucking so hard on his cigarette that it’s almost gone already, and I notice a tremor in his hand.

Garrett looks back at me. “That true?” he asks quietly.

I nod, dabbing at the blood under my nose again.

He sighs. “I’ll take care of him. But Dare, no more. You understand? I can’t have you making these messes in my bar. No. More.”

Garrett grips my shoulder and gives me a squeeze. I wince at the pain. That must be the shoulder that hit the wall.

I nod again as a car pulls up behind the group of us that are outside, lights illuminating the parking lot. I see the door open, and Lev steps out. My heart drops.

“I called him,” Garrett explains. “He’s taking you home.”

“What the fuck, Garrett?” I seethe.

“You need a babysitter tonight, and he’s the lucky one.”

“I don’t need a fucking babysitter.” I’m starting to see red again.

Garrett turns to Lev, who has somehow managed to sneak up and is standing right beside me. “Thanks for coming so fast, Lev. Get him home.”

Lev nods and takes my arm. I feel an electric shock where he touches me, and as much as I like it, I yank my arm out of his hand. “*Don’t* fucking touch me,” I say, almost surprising myself with the growl that escapes me.

One of Garrett’s guys comes out then, handing Tim and the group of us some paper towels. He hands a stack to me, and I put them to my lip and nose. I don’t even know where else I’m messed up. My side hurts, and my hands are throbbing. I’ll figure it out later when my adrenaline crashes.

Tim stands up as his girlfriend’s car pulls in the lot, another woman in the front seat. His girlfriend gets out and runs to him, then gives him a quick hug before looking him over. I hear them murmuring to one another, and he waves to Garrett and gets in the car. They drive away, throwing gravel behind

them. I don’t know how anyone else is getting home, and I don’t care. My focus is on Lev and why Garrett called him.

“I’ll get a car,” I say, pulling out my phone.

“No,” Garrett says forcefully. “Lev is taking you home. You owe me that much, Darian.”

I scoff and stand there, staring at him. “I don’t owe you shit,” I say, spitting a little bit of blood on the ground.

I hear Lev take a deep, exasperated breath beside me. “Come on, Dare. Let’s go.”

“I. Can. Get. A. Car.”

The door to the bar bursts open, distracting all of us. One of the assholes from the fight is being dragged out, flanked by two of the bartenders. I stiffen.

“Let’s go,” Lev says again, a little more gently this time.

I really don’t want to go to jail tonight, and I’m starting to feel the pain and aches from the fight, so I give in, turn around, and follow him to his car. The air in the car is stifling, and I feel my skin throbbing. My cheek and lips have a pulse. My knuckles are stinging and throbbing right along with my face.

Lev starts driving in silence, and I throw my head back against the headrest and let out a deep sigh, closing my eyes.

“Rough night.” Lev’s statement is just that. It’s not a question.

I scoff. “You could say that.”

I expect him to ask what happened, but he doesn’t. Instead, he chuckles. “You’re going to be a pain in my ass, aren’t you little lycan?”

I don’t even hear the whole sentence because I’m hung up on him saying I am *going* to be a pain in his ass. I *am* going to be a pain in his ass. Like he’s going to see me more. Like he’s going to be involved in my life. A chill rushes through me, but I don’t say anything back.

I open my eyes as he takes a turn, and it’s then that I notice we’re not headed toward my house but to Lev’s place again. Quietly, I say, “You can take me home if you want to. I’m not drunk tonight.”

He turns to me, and I catch the shimmer in his eyes from the reflection of the streetlights. He looks back at the road. “You’re coming home with me. You’re a mess, and I want to make sure you aren’t hurt more than I can see.” His voice is calm and steady, like he’s talking to a wild animal, trying to get it to calm down and not launch into attack mode again. There doesn’t seem to be much of an argument with him about it, either. His mind is made up.

I swallow hard and look at him again. My vision's a little blurry, probably because my cheek is starting to swell under my eye, and I have the fleeting thought that I'll have a black eye in the morning, for sure. But I'm distracted by him enough that the thought leaves my mind almost as soon as I have it. My eyes trace down the side of his face, taking in his profile. He has a strong jaw, which is clamped tightly right now. Ticking, even. His face has a little bit of stubble, leading to beautiful, pillowy lips. His nose is in proportion to his face, and his eyelashes press out and up. I realize for the first time how long they are. And how beautiful they are. His Adam's apple is there but not huge. It's just enough to be able to see it, and it's sexy as hell. He's wearing a hoodie and sweatpants, which makes me think he was just hanging out.

I wonder what was interrupted to have him come get me tonight.

He must know I'm staring at him, because he licks his lips and smiles, still not looking at me. I turn my head back to face forward and close my eyes, willing away the tingling sensation that runs up my spine.

A few minutes later, we pull into the parking lot of his apartment complex. "Déjà vu, huh?" he says with a chuckle as we get out of the car. "Maybe tonight you won't be puking your guts out everywhere, though."

"Funny," I retort.

He opens the front door and lets me go in ahead of him. He follows as I walk into the dark room. I'm moving slowly, and I feel his body close to mine as he comes in the doorway and presses forward to shut the door. I purposely don't move to see if he'll get any closer. God, I want him to get closer. The light flips on, and I hear his keys drop onto the table by the door. He scoots around me and makes his way into the kitchen, turning that light on also. I immediately feel the warmth of his body disappear and want to figure out a way to get it back.

Lev is silent as he takes two bottles of water out of the refrigerator and puts them on the counter. He grabs a small, white bottle with a red lid out of the cabinet over the microwave and shakes two pills out into his palm, then sets them down beside the water. He also grabs an ice pack from the freezer, gets a fresh towel out of the drawer by the oven, and wraps the ice pack in the towel. Every step seems to be so measured, like he's trying to think of everything and not forget a single thing.

He approaches me and hands me the water and ice. Pointing to his cheekbone where I know mine is swollen, he says, "You're gonna want to get this ice on that, like, now."

I walk to the sofa and sit down with a heavy sigh, putting the ice to my cheek. The pressure hurts, so I lighten my touch and lean forward.

“Drink the water and take the medicine, and I’ll go get some stuff to help you get cleaned up,” Lev says. Then he leaves the room.

So bossy. I smile.

But then my adrenaline rush starts to crash, and I lean back onto the sofa and rest my head on one of the cushions, closing my eyes. I bring the towel with the ice in it up to my cheek again and gently set it there, like Lev told me to. A moment later, Lev’s footsteps come closer and then move away again, toward the kitchen this time. He’s doing something in there, but I’m too tired to try to figure out what it is. I hear one of the chairs scraping across the kitchen floor.

“Dare,” he says softly. “Come in here please. I want to get you cleaned up.”

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Chapter 19

Levon

My heart is racing, and I can't believe Dare is back in my apartment, after another issue at the Exchange—and he's a mess again. Dare in my apartment is definitely something I would like to have happen more often, but really if it's by his choice and not for any other reason, like being beaten up. I want him to be here because he wants to be here. At least he's not puking everywhere this time, although maybe this alternative isn't much better.

I was just chilling out earlier when I got the call from Garrett. Before I even answered it I knew it had to do with Dare. I figured he was going to tell me that Dare was drunk again and that I needed to come and get him. I didn't expect him to tell me that Dare was outside in the parking lot after getting into a fight.

I'm moving quickly through the apartment, gathering what I needed to clean him up. "I'm just getting a few things," I tell him, my voice a little louder than necessary. He's in the other room, and I want to be sure he hears me. "Then we'll see what the damage is." I don't know how badly he's hurt,

if he hit his head, and how sober he is right now. He seems to be more sober than he was the last time he was here, but he's definitely banged up and bleeding, and I want to help him get all of that checked out and tended to.

"I don't need your help, Lev," he mumbles, just loud enough for me to hear.

I know he's trying to be strong, but he doesn't need to be. Not tonight. I like to think that I can be someone who helps to make him feel safe and secure, whether that's in a friend capacity or . . . something else. I put the first aid kit, washcloths, a bath towel, and a few other things on the counter.

"I'm well aware that you can clean yourself up," I say and swallow hard. "Everything is out here for you to do that. But sometimes you don't have to be the strong one. I want to do this for you." I turn and make my way to the doorway between the kitchen and living room. "Let me help." I feel my cheeks warm.

If I can calm him down, make him feel like he's not walking this world alone, I want to do that for him. Lindsey's voice is in my ear as I think about what she said the other day—that if I'm going to get to know Dare, it should be for the right reasons and because I want to, not because I feel like I have to help him or save him. I move a chair away from the table. Everything is ready.

There are a few tense moments as I wonder what he's going to do and how he's going to react, but Dare finally rises to his feet and shuffles into the kitchen. He plops into the chair but seems to immediately regret that decision, sucking in some air and gripping his side. He quickly draws his hand away and stills his face. But I notice, even though he acts like nothing just happened.

With him sitting here so open and vulnerable, I can't help but be transfixed. Our eyes lock, and I realize that this may not have been the best idea. Even with his face all bloodied and tattered, he's absolutely beautiful. His emerald-green eyes hold wonder and tenderness and something else. Loneliness? Defeat? His plush and now split lips are perfectly pink, and my *god* that lip ring. I feel my dick stir behind my sweatpants and quickly will it to stop. This is not the time to get aroused.

I clear my throat and move to the sink to wash my hands. Then I go back to the table, take one of the washcloths, and dunk it into the bowl of cool water. I squeeze it out and look at him.

“I put some mild soap in the water and didn’t make it very hot. This is going to hurt while I clean you up. I’ll be as gentle as I can, okay?” My voice is soft and quiet.

He nods. Worried that I have limited time before he up and leaves again, I touch the washcloth to the skin between his nose and lip. I’m at an awkward angle, so reach out to tilt his chin. I pull my hand back immediately, realizing that as much as I want to, I can’t just touch him.

“Can I—” I clear my throat. “Can I touch your chin . . . right here?” I reach out again, my hand shaking slightly. My heart is pounding in my chest.

He nods and licks his lips.

I gently touch his chin, lifting it so I can get a better look at him, and wipe the blood away. It looks like his nose isn’t broken and that it’s stopped bleeding.

I wet the cloth again and dab at the small cut above his eyebrow. He flinches, and I step back.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

Dare reaches out and takes my wrist gently, moving my hand back to the cut on his eye. When I touch it again, he closes his eyes, and I hear him take a deep, shaky breath.

“You okay?” My voice comes out near a whisper. He nods. I wet the cloth again and touch his eyebrow once more, carefully wiping the dried blood off his skin. “I don’t think you need stitches, but I have a few Steri-Strips to put on, okay?”

Dare nods, and I apply the few Steri-Strips it takes to keep the cut on his eyebrow from opening and bleeding more. I know that I have to clean his cut lip and hands next, and my heart is pounding even harder now.

When I’m finished with his eyebrow, I dip the cloth into the water and gently put my hand under his chin once again so I can lift his face up and see the cut on his lip. I just hope he doesn’t feel my hands shaking while I do this.

I try to be soft when I touch his lip, and to my complete shock, my pinky finger brushes his lip ring. Heat rushes through me, and my dick is close to springing to life.

Dammit. *Do NOT get hard right now, Lev.*

I try to think about anything else I can to stop it from happening. But I also want to be in this moment with Dare so badly. I swallow hard and wipe

his lip again. The cut there isn't deep, and when I've wiped away all the blood, I take a step back to collect myself.

Dare's eyes open when I release his chin. His breathing seems a little bit shallow, like mine, but neither of us say anything. The silence is so loud that I just stare at him for another second longer. I both want to rush through this so that it's over and also make it last all night.

I rewet the cloth and move to the scratches on the right side of his face. One looks like a brush burn, and the other is definitely from fingernails or jewelry of some sort. Thankfully, none of them are deep, and once the blood is cleaned off, I put a Band-Aid on to keep the wounds clean.

After I get a new washcloth, I saturate it and then wring it out. This part isn't going to be pleasant for him. Something tightens in my chest. The last thing I want to do is hurt him.

"I need your hand," I say, gently offering my palm to him. He sucks in a breath and stalls a beat but then flattens his palm against mine. The touch sends a jolt into my arm, and I swallow hard and try to ignore it as I look at the knuckles on his right hand. They're swollen, and the skin is broken open on a few of them, scrapes on the others. I purse my lips and touch the cloth to the wounds on his hand. He hisses but doesn't pull back. "You're doing so well," I say quietly. "I'm sorry if I'm hurting you."

His eyes snap to mine, and all I can do is stare back at him. I can barely breathe, and my throat is so fucking dry. I try to get through his right hand, cleaning the blood off as best as I can. When I'm done, I gently set it down on his thigh, grazing his knee with my fingers. His breath catches, and the air in the room feels like it's supercharged.

I reach for his other hand, and he gives it to me without hesitation. We make eye contact again when I touch the cloth to his knuckles, and time stops.

This man is absolutely everything.

We both freeze in place, left hands connected. Dare's touch on my palm is as light as a feather, yet I can feel him trembling. He doesn't break eye contact, and he swallows hard.

"Lev." His voice is rough and scratchy but also quiet, barely a whisper. "What is happening right now?"

I shake my head. I feel like I swallowed sand, and I'm pretty sure that there's no air in the room. I manage to clear my throat and wet my lips.

“I . . . I don’t know. I feel like I . . . I really want to kiss you,” I blurt out. I can’t believe those words just left my lips. They’re true, but the fact that I voiced them is shocking, even to me. This is Dare I’m talking to!

Dare smirks at me, his long eyelashes fluttering. He barely hesitates. “Then kiss me,” he says, so quietly I wonder if I even heard him correctly.

My heart is going to beat out of my chest. I wonder if he can hear it as I reach my hand down to his shoulder. I need to steady myself. He tips his head up, and his pink tongue sweeps his bottom lip before it disappears. I slowly lean over, swallowing hard and taking a step back to get a better angle. Our eyes meet, and I find myself searching his face for any sign that this is not a good idea. Dare tilts his head upward, slightly parting his lips to give them another swipe of his tongue.

When my lips are a hair’s breadth from Dare’s, I stop. I can feel his shaky breath on my lips, and I whisper, “You sure you’re okay with this?”

I don’t even get to take another breath before his lips brush against mine. It’s quick, and he pulls away slightly before meeting my gaze. I give him a soft smile, and then our lips meet again in a warm, gentle kiss.

Dare tilts his head a little more, and I feel his mouth open ever so slightly. I meet him movement for movement as our lips slide over each other’s. It’s tender and slow, our lips fitting together like puzzle pieces as we melt into one another. I’m pretty sure I hear a whimper come out of his throat, and that tells me it’s okay to keep going. I kiss him more deeply.

I don’t even know how much time has passed when Dare pulls away. I lick my lips, tasting him and a little bit of copper from the blood that’s still there. I’m pretty sure he’s panting. He stands up and meets me at my height. He’s maybe just an inch or two shorter than I am, and for some reason, I think that’s just absolutely perfect. His arms land on my shoulders, and his hands slip around to cradle the back of my neck as he licks his lips.

“Kiss me again,” he says.

He doesn’t have to ask. I lean forward, much less tentative than before, and I press my warm lips to his. I’m fucking flying. His damn lip ring adds another whole dimension to the kiss. I can feel it against my lips, and I run my tongue along his bottom lip to get him to open for me. Dare responds, parting his mouth to let me inside. He moans, and it’s the sweetest sound I have ever heard.

His hands come together behind my neck, and his fingers run through my hair, starting at the hairline. I grip his face on either side, being careful of

his swollen cheekbone and covered scratch, and I gently tilt his head to get a better angle at the kiss. My tongue consumes his mouth, and he gives right back. We're licking and kissing and biting without abandon, and it's the best fucking kiss I've ever had in my entire life. I feel Dare melt into me, and I don't ever want to stop.

I crowd him against the counter and push my hips against him. There is no reason to try to hide my hard cock at this point. I mean, I'm in sweatpants that aren't concealing me much at all. He sighs and pushes back against me, and he's hard too. He sucks my tongue, and I groan.

We finally pull off one another, and I touch our foreheads together as he chases the kiss, giving me a peck on my swollen bottom lip. We're both breathing hard now, our dicks pressed against each other's groins and our breaths mixing in the small space between us. With a deep inhale, I straighten up a bit and look at him. His irises are blown black, and he's smiling.

"Did that hurt your cut?" I ask, removing my hand from his neck and gently touching the spot on his lip with my thumb, where it's started to bleed again.

He shakes his head, reaching over to grab one of the washcloths. Then he dabs at the cut.

"I'm pretty sure nothing hurts right now," he says with a chuckle.

He reaches for me and pulls me in, and I turn to kiss him again. That's not what he's going for though. Dare angles his lips away from me and pulls me in tightly for a hug. A *hug*. He's warm and solid, and I can feel the corded muscles of his back as I run my hands up and down his shoulders, to the middle of his back and up again. He sighs, pulling me closer. I didn't think there was any room between us, but he makes it happen.

It's sort of weird at first, but I eventually relax into him as well. We stand like this, wrapped in an embrace, and lose track of time. My dick starts to calm down, and I think his does, too. Eventually we pull away, and I'm hit with the reality of everything that just happened.

I kissed him.

We kissed—and it was hot. It was amazing. It was blistering and euphoric.

As much as I don't want to, because I could kiss Dare all night long, I let go of him and step away and out of his space.

A chill hits me, being out of his warmth. Reluctantly, I move farther away from him, over to the refrigerator, and I grab another bottle of water. I drink it down quickly as Dare does the same with his. When he lowers the bottle from his lips, he's just looking at me, a bewildered expression on his face.

"What?" I ask, smiling at him.

He takes a deep breath. "That was . . . You're a fantastic kisser."

I let out a belly laugh, throwing my head back. Looking at him again, I see he's smiling, and I love that. "You're not so bad yourself, lycan." I reach my hand out as his brow furrows. "Come on. Let's get you comfortable and go to bed."

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Chapter 20

Darian

I'm sort of stupefied by what just happened. Lev cleaning me up and helping me was the most romantic and erotic thing I've experienced in a long time. His gentle touches and soft voice won me over immediately, and I couldn't help myself. His touch alone was sending me. I got the sense that he wanted to kiss me, but I thought he probably wouldn't do anything if I didn't push it. And I'm so glad I did.

That was the hottest, most amazing kiss I've had, maybe ever. After the intimacy and contact, I needed him to hug me. I was crashing hard. Tonight was a lot, and I needed him to just hold me and make me feel safe. And he did exactly that.

Now he's leading me to his bedroom.

When we get there, he clicks on the soft light by his bed and turns to me. He tells me to hold on one second and disappears again out into the kitchen. He comes back with two strips of gauze, holding them up to me. His cheeks turn pink.

"I forgot to wrap your hands," he says, a small chuckle leaving his lips.

I offer him my left hand, and he gently wraps the gauze around my knuckles, securing it with a knot that kinda hurts when he tugs. I jerk a bit, and he gives me a pained look.

“I’m sorry, I know. But—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt, clearing my throat and giving him my other hand.

He does the same, and I don’t flinch this time, instead I just stare at his gorgeous face. He brings my knuckles to his lips and gives them a gentle kiss before releasing them.

“Thank you.” It’s all I can manage to say to him.

It’s safe to assume that I’m spending the night since he’s got me in his room. That thought sends a chill through me. This is so different from the other night. I want him to share his bed with me tonight. I did last time, too. I almost asked him to stay and lie with me, but I was too scared. I hope tonight is different.

Lev goes to his chest of drawers and pulls out a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants. “You can wear these if you want to.” He hands them to me. “There are toothbrushes in the cabinet under the sink and towels there, too. Let me know if you need anything.”

I know he had a toothbrush for me last time I stayed, but I was puking, so I hope he has a fresh one.

I follow his instructions and go into the bathroom. After washing my face as best as I can, I find a new toothbrush under the sink and brush my teeth. When I look at myself in the mirror, I grimace at the bruise already forming around my eye and the swelling on that side of my face. I touch my cheek gently but then pull back because it hurts.

I relieve myself, and before I change into his T-shirt, I check out the rest of my body in the mirror. There’s a bruise forming on my side as well, where someone must have punched or kicked me. I’ve probably also got bruised ribs. Fun. It does hurt to take a deep breath. The fight seems like it was forever ago, even though it was less than a couple of hours earlier.

Lev’s shirt is just a tad too big for me, but it’ll do. I leave the sweatpants off and carry them with me into the room. Lev is standing there, waiting for me, and he sucks in a breath as he looks me up and down.

I smile at him. “I don’t like to sleep in pants.” I say. “Is that okay?”

He strolls past me, his hand making contact with my hip, and leans in for another kiss. My heart rate speeds up again, and I kiss him back. This one is a little less intense than the one in the kitchen, but it’s still magical.

“That’s absolutely perfect,” he says. “I’m going to get ready. Do you want to . . . um . . . do you want to sleep, er, uh, stay in my bed with me tonight?”

I don’t answer with words. Instead, I give him a quick peck and head over to his bed, crawling under the covers.

He smiles. “I’ll be right back.”

A few minutes later, Lev’s bathroom door opens, and I almost choke. He’s in a T-shirt and just his boxer briefs, too. He’s not wearing sweatpants anymore. With the soft light in the room and the scruff of his facial hair, he looks so incredible. Tattoos line his arms and swirl up under the sleeves of his T-shirt. I can’t see the rest of them, but I assume they’re on his torso as well. I make a mental note to look at them more closely—and fully—sometime soon.

He comes over to the bed and crawls in beside me. Yawning, he settles in on his side and looks at me. I’m lying on my back, my hands crossed on my stomach.

“How are you?” he asks.

I turn my head toward him, tracing his face with my eyes. “I’m okay,” I reply. “A little sore, but I’ll be alright.”

“Can I ask you what happened tonight?”

I sigh. “Sure. But can you . . . Would you mind . . . Can you . . .” *Ugh!* I run my hand through my hair, frustrated with myself.

He looks at me, concern etching his face. “What do you need?” He asks this softly, propping himself up on his elbow.

“Can we just get a little bit closer? Maybe you can . . . put your feet on mine or touch my leg or something?” I don’t know why I feel like such a spaz asking him this, but I really need to be close to him, and this is the only way I can get what I need. I have to be honest.

Lev smiles at me, and I tense as I get the sense he’s pitying me.

“Hey, hey,” he says, moving over a little bit so our bodies are closer.

His hand reaches out, and he starts drawing soft circles on my arm and the top of my hand, careful to avoid my sore knuckles. I take a deep breath and let the tension go, enjoying the contact.

“This okay?” he asks.

I nod. “This is good. Thank you.” I take a moment to compose myself, letting the soft touch of Lev’s thumb lull me into a peaceful trance. “So, I was at the Exchange with a few friends.” I continue to tell Lev everything

that happened tonight, from the group of guys to Keira being grabbed to the guy calling me a slur to when Garrett had me outside. The entire time I'm talking, he makes circles around my hands and then strokes his fingers gently up and down my arm. It feels so fucking good, and although I'm exhausted, I feel myself getting hard.

When I finish the story, Lev shakes his head. "I'm sorry," he says.

"For what?"

"Just all of it, Dare. I mean, you were helping your friend, and now you're all banged up, and that guy is a complete asshole, going after your sexuality. I mean, who even says that shit anymore? I just feel bad for you."

"Don't feel sorry for me," I say, an edge creeping into my voice.

Lev stops rubbing my arm. "Wha—"

"Don't feel sorry for me, Lev. I don't need you to feel sorry for me." My cheeks warm, and my voice sounds a little more harsh than I wanted it to.

"I hear you," he says. "I just . . . I don't know what . . ."

"Don't feel sorry for me. *Please*." I shift myself toward him a little bit, wincing at the tug from the bruise on my side. "Just kiss me."

Lev is happy to do so. He leans his body over mine, capturing my lips again in a searing kiss. He's half on his side and half on me, his thigh pressing between my legs as his tongue pushes into my mouth. He's grinding against me in time with his tongue rolling around with mine, and I moan as I feel him push his erection against my stomach, sliding his underwear-clad dick over mine.

His kisses are intoxicating. He tastes like what I imagine heaven to be like, and I can't get enough. I kiss him back as my heart skyrockets. The pain in my side and ribs fades into the background, and I let myself get lost in this man, using my lips and pelvis to feel good, grinding against him. Lev pulls his lips away from me and trails open-mouthed kisses across my jaw and neck before returning to my jaw again. I run my fingers through his soft hair.

"Lev," I whisper as he sucks on the sensitive skin behind my ear.

He pulls away and looks at me. "I need to come, Dare. Is that okay?"

I nod, unable to breathe enough to talk, and he reaches down and pushes his boxers under his balls. He gives his cock a squeeze and moans. I swallow hard and do the same. We aren't even trying to see each other's size or girth or anything. This is carnal. It's a need to get relief. We're caught up in this moment, right now.

Lev captures my lips again and shifts one more time so he can get good friction on my pelvis. Our dicks rub together a few times as we grind against each other desperately, and I feel Lev stiffen.

He rips off my lips and buries his face in my neck with a moan. “Fuuuuuck. Fuck, I’m coming,” he grunts against my neck, rutting his dick into my body with another moan.

He nips the skin on the side of my neck, which sends me over the edge, and I come onto my fist and T-shirt.

“Oh my god,” I gasp, trying to get my breathing under control as I give my cock one more stroke.

Lev releases me and rolls over to his back. We’re both panting. He looks at me with a sated smile on his swollen lips. After another moment, he starts to sit up. “I’ll get us clean shirts. Did it get on your underwear?”

I shift the covers and look down as Lev gets out of bed. “I’m good,” I say.

He comes back a few seconds later with a washcloth and two clean T-shirts. Once we’re changed and settled in bed again, he reaches up and turns the light off.

“Night, Dare,” he says quietly, turning into me. He gently places his arm over my hip and scoots a little closer, spooning me. “Is this okay?”

His breath tickles my neck, and my skin erupts in goose bumps.

“Perfect,” I murmur.

I don’t know what’s happening between us or if what we just did means anything to him, but I don’t have time to think about it because sleep envelops me quickly, and I fade away.

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Chapter 21

Levon

I wake up as the sun peeks through the curtains, and my first thought is how warm I am. I smile to myself when I wake up enough to realize why. I have another man in my bed, pressed up against me. I'm lying on my stomach, arms under my pillow and legs open, and a body is nestled up against mine, one leg folded over my butt cheek and an arm around my back. Light breathing tickles against my armpit, and contentedness hits me.

The man is Dare. Dare is in my bed with me, pressed tightly up against me.

As I slowly continue to bring myself into the waking world, my mind drifts back to last night. From Garrett calling me to tell me that Dare had been in a fight to me bringing him home and tending to his cuts and bruises. And then that kiss. Oh my god, that kiss. I shouldn't have liked it as much as I did. I'm worried that it changed something, made it so that I'll never want to kiss anyone else ever again. The hug, too. I was caught a little off guard, but Dare was so natural about it that it wasn't awkward. It actually felt good.

And then afterward, in bed . . .

My arm is asleep, and I need to move, so I roll over gently, trying to not disturb him. He groans as I readjust but then quickly shifts over me again,

pressing his side against me but now with his head resting on my chest. My hand moves to his back, and I stroke up and down gently, slipping under his T-shirt and rubbing his soft skin. I place a soft kiss on the top of his head and hold my lips against him, continuing to stroke his back. He lets out a little sigh followed by a quiet breath, and he presses his groin against me, settling in a little closer.

I close my eyes, completely warm and sated by his body heat and scent, and it's not long before his breathing changes again. He's fallen back to sleep. I don't want to wake him yet since I know it's early, so I lie there with him and continue to think as I stroke his back.

Last night was unexpected. I hadn't meant for anything to happen, but after taking care of him and seeing the way he was looking at me, I couldn't stop myself. I know I asked several times if he was sure he was okay with it, and he didn't complain about anything that happened. In fact, he seemed every bit as enthusiastic as I felt.

He looks so peaceful laying on me. I gently brush some of this hair out of his face as I study him, his eyes softly closed and his long, dark lashes contrasting against his skin. He's beautiful. I'd stare at him all day if I could. I'm not sure where we go from here, but I hope I get the chance to hang out with him more often and figure it out. As much as I want to rush into something with him, I know if anything is going to happen between us, we have to take this at his pace. He's been through so much, and the last thing I want to do is hurt him more than I already have.

Once I realize that sleep isn't going to take me under again, I decide to get up. I plant one more kiss on his head and carefully slide out from under Dare. He barely stirs. I make sure he's covered back up before going to the kitchen to start some coffee.

After I've downed my first cup a few minutes later, I text Garrett to let him know that all is okay with Dare and to thank him again for calling me to come get him last night. I want to cook breakfast for Dare, to make sure he has something to eat, although maybe it's a little selfish on my part because I also want an excuse to spend more time with him. So I pull out some pans and get started, figuring a big, traditional breakfast is probably the best bet.

The bacon is sizzling and I've just cracked the first egg into the pan when I hear Darian walk into the kitchen. I look up, a grin already working its way onto my lips, but then my stomach drops and I suck in a breath when I see his face. His eye is puffy and bruised. His bottom lip is also swollen, and he has

another bruise on the other side of his face, right above his eye where he must have caught an elbow or a fist.

He smirks at me. “I know. It’s bad.” He comes to the table and sits. His voice is adorable, morning scratchiness and all.

“It looks sore.”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t feel good. But I’ll be fine.”

I add another egg to the pan. “Do you want coffee? I have breakfast started.” I tip my head toward the pan on the stove where I’m scrambling the eggs.

Dare smiles. “And I get breakfast the next morning. I need to take a few punches more often,” he teases. “I’d love some coffee. And food.”

“How about some ice, too?” I say, and when he shrugs a noncommittal response, I turn the heat down lower on the stove so the eggs don’t burn, then grab a Ziploc bag out of the drawer and fill it with ice. I take a clean dish towel and wrap it around the bag. “Here, put this on your eye.”

I hand him the package and kiss his forehead. I don’t know what the boundary is right now, but I figure a forehead kiss is safe. And I guess it’s okay with him, because he gives me a soft smirk and lifts the ice to his eye. My heart warms in my chest as I plate up the food and pour him some coffee. After I set the full plate and his cup of plain black coffee in front of him, I join him at the table. We eat in silence, a light feeling of awkwardness between us.

A couple of minutes later, when I can’t stand the quiet anymore, I put my fork down. “I’m sorry about your—”

“Don’t,” he cuts in. “Please. Don’t feel sorry for me, Lev. You didn’t do this.” His voice changes, taking on a tighter tone, and a darkness passes over his face.

I make a mental note to be more cautious with that. Dare clearly doesn’t like when someone pities or feels sorry for him. We sit in silence for a few more minutes while we finish breakfast.

When I’m done, I lean back in my chair a bit. “What are your plans today?” I ask, picking up my coffee cup. I take the last sip of the bitter liquid that’s settled at the bottom.

I must make a face because Dare laughs. “Oh, I’m hanging out with my buddy Ryan later. Do you know him?”

I purse my lips. “I don’t think so, outside of people talking about him being your friend or associating your names with each other.”

“Ah, okay. Well, he’s . . . he’s my best friend. He has a girlfriend named Katie, and they’re freaking joined at the hip.” A smirk crosses his lips, and he pulls the bag of ice away from his eye and sets it on the table.

“Yeah, Lindsey has talked about her. I think they’re friends or something. Do you like her?” I ask.

“Yeah, she’s cool. She and Ryan are pretty perfect for each other.”

“That’s cool.” Why is this conversation a little awkward? I had the guy’s tongue down my throat and slept in bed with him last night. I should be able to talk to him.

He must be feeling the same way, because he suddenly blurts out, “So I didn’t get that contract that we were talking about at the lake.” Before I can answer, he stands up and takes his coffee cup and plate to the sink.

I copy him, standing up to move my dishes to the sink, and because I don’t want to tell him I’m sorry, I say, “Well, that really sucks.”

“Yeah, it actually does, but it’s okay.” He shrugs and leans up against the counter. “I have a few other things brewing and some bids out. I think I’m going to stick to some smaller accounts for a while. They seem to pay more for the time I spend on them. I should be hearing back about a few bids soon, actually, so I think I’ll be okay.”

He gets this adorable spark when he talks about his work and art. I love that he has something he loves to do. I feel like I could sit and listen to Darian talk about anything, and it would make me happy.

He glances up at me through his long lashes. “So what’s been going on at the shop?”

I can’t help that I smile. He’s taking an interest in me and what makes me happy. “It’s going really well,” I tell him. “I really like it, and making the transition hasn’t been as bad as I thought it would be. My uncle ran a great business, so stepping in was easy. You should come see it sometime,” I venture.

Dare smiles at me. “I’d love to. But, um, like I said at the lake, I know nothing about motorcycles. Or the mechanics of them.” He chuckles quietly.

“I’ll teach you everything I know,” I flirt. He smiles.

I know that our time this morning is running out. Although a little awkward, it’s got a certain level of its own comfort now that we seem to have worked through the original awkwardness. I’m not sure if we’re going to talk about what happened last night or what we want to happen next, but I do know that I don’t want what’s happening and blooming between us to be over. I don’t want last night to be the only time anything like that happens,

and I do want to get to know Dare more, in whatever capacity he's comfortable with.

Dare clearly senses my thoughts in the moment and excuses himself to go back to my room. He comes out dressed in his clothes from last night. I look up from my phone.

"You're leaving." It comes out as a statement, not a question.

Dare rubs the back of his neck, looking down at the ground and then back up at me again. "Yeah, I just . . . I think I should go. I have to shower and stuff. Ryan is coming to get me, so you don't need to take me home or anything."

"Oh, okay. I could have . . ." I can't finish the sentence. I don't know what it is about Dare that makes my brain so mushy. Ugh. But I can't even form a full sentence around him right now, and I'm not sure what I was really expecting for today, but I know I *had* expected to at least drive him home.

He stands in the kitchen by the door, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, his hands in his pockets. Is he nervous?

"So yeah—thank you for, um, for getting me from the bar last night and . . . and for helping me clean up." He blushes and then pulls his lip ring into his mouth, and my knees go weak. "And you know, for everything." He gives me a goofy smile.

"Dare," I say as I get closer to him, crowding his space. His eyes widen and he parts his beautiful lips. My hand grips his hip, and I lean in, softly connecting our mouths. He sighs as our lips rub together smoothly. I kiss him tenderly, and when I pull back after only a short time, I touch my forehead to his. My tongue licks his taste off my lips. It's incredible. I want to know what he tastes like in other places too. I smile at the thought. Thank god his eyes are closed so he doesn't see.

"Dare," I say again, since my original thought was broken by our kiss.

"Hmmm?" He pulls his forehead away from me.

"Let me take you home. It's the least I can do." I release his hip and reach for the keys on the table beside my door.

He stops me, his hand on my chest. "It's fine, Lev. I already called Ryan. I'll be fine. I'll text you later, okay?" He leans in and catches me off guard with another peck to the lips before grabbing the door handle and stepping outside into the crisp air.

I watch as a red Hellcat pulls up and Dare climbs in. A chill runs up my spine. I don't like that it's not me taking him home and that he's now in the hands of someone else. Although that someone else is his straight best friend,

I can’t deny the completely irrational and ridiculous spike of jealousy that stabs my chest.

He’s not yours, Lev.

I shake my head. “Not yet,” I say out loud.

***

I busy myself with chores around the apartment to help the day pass. When I finally go back into my bedroom later in the day I notice something on the floor by the bed and bend over to pick it up. It’s the pair of fishnet gloves and sleeves that Dare was wearing last night. I bring them to my nose and inhale to see if they smell like him. They carry his scent, and I sniff deeper.

I’m so gone for this man.

I shake my head and put the sleeves on the dresser to give to him when I see him again.

As I settle into bed, my phone alert goes off to let me know I have a message, and I jump, immediately picking up my phone. I hope it’s something from Dare; he said he was going to text me, but he hasn’t yet. A deep disappointment weighs on me, however, when I only see a notification from my uncle, his text confirming that he’s going to meet me at the shop tomorrow morning to go over a few things and finalize a decision on a new, more efficient billing system. I send him a reply and then sink back down under the covers.

The later it gets, the more I realize that I’m probably not going to hear from Dare tonight. Then I scold myself for being so ridiculous. I take a shower and crawl back into bed, opening my social media app to see if Dare posted anything about his night. However, there’s nothing new, and I can’t shake this feeling of jealousy. What the hell is wrong with me? I’m not a jealous guy, and that’s twice today that I’ve felt like this! I groan and put my phone back on the nightstand before I roll over.

I’m just starting to drift off to sleep when I hear a notification come through my cell. I turn to my other side and reach for my phone, my heart rate picking up.

Lycan: I hope you’re not asleep.

Me: I’m not sleeping. How was your night?

Lycan: It was cool. Ryan just left.

I can't pretend that I'm not relieved it sounds like they just hung out at his house.

Me: Cool. I hope you had fun.

Lycan: We did. I'm tired. And high.

I chuckle and shake my head.

Me: Will you sleep?

The three bubbles fold and open, fold and open, fold and open, and then stop. I wait. They go through the same pattern three more times before I get a reply.

Lycan: I should. I think I'd sleep better if I was with you.

I'm beaming.

Me: Hopefully soon Little Lycan.

Lycan: *bed emoji*

That's all I get the rest of the night, but I can't stop smiling. I lie back and blow out a breath as I settle under the covers, thinking about how this man is going to destroy me.

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Chapter 22

Darian

My face still hurts, my ribs are bruised, and my knuckles are aching. And I'm tired. I just really don't want to get up to start this week.

After I force myself out of bed, take a shower, and get some coffee, I settle in at my computer and check my email. It's all the same. Emails with a few options for some small jobs, one from my dad telling me that he's doing business from his office in the UK for a few weeks, and a bunch of junk. I file and delete what I can and reply to the ones that need my attention. Then I get started on the project I'm working on. It's one of the small ones, but it'll keep me busy for a while.

As I work, my mind keeps wandering, and I can't stop myself from wondering what Lev is doing. I'm kind of annoyed with myself that I can't seem to control it, and I know I have to be careful and not let this keep me from working. Easier said than done, though.

He's probably at the shop right now, and he did say he wanted me to come over sometime. But I don't know if that's something I should do only when he gives me a more specific invite or if he meant it to be an open

invitation. In fact, I don't even know where we stand right now. Things are confusing.

When Ryan picked me up at Lev's place the night after the bar fight, his reaction to my face was almost comical. I'd told him that I'd been in a fight and was at Lev's, which was why I needed him to come get me, and he came without any hesitation. It wasn't until later, when we were at his place wasting time and playing video games, that Ryan asked me what the heck was going on. He's easy enough to talk to that he quickly pulled all of my conflicting thoughts out of me.

"So what happened?" Ryan asks. "And why do you look like your heart is waging war with your head?"

I sigh loudly. "I don't know. Last night was so . . . it was just so . . . nice*."*

Ryan chuckles. "Nice?" he repeats. "I assume you mean with Lev and not getting the shit kicked out of you."

"First of all," I say, holding up a finger, "I didn't get the shit kicked out of me. I got into a fight, and I kicked some shit, too." I smile at him, and he chuckles. "But with Lev? Yeah. He cleaned me up, Ryan. Like, he got all this shit together and made me sit in the chair and patched me up. He was so kind and caring. It was . . . nice."

Ryan raises an eyebrow at me and gives me a smirk. "He likes you."

"Ugh!" I growl. "I like him too."

Ryan kicks his feet up and down. "So?"

"So what?" I ask.

"So what now?"

"That's just it," I tell him. "I don't know. I had a crush on him when we were younger, but I never acted on it because, well . . . you know. But now that we've reconnected, it's hard to stop these feelings. He's successful, nice, smart. He's caring, and he . . ." I laugh. "He's a tremendous kisser." I bite my bottom lip and smirk at Ryan.

"Gross." He laughs.

"Shut up," I throw at him.

"So?" he asks again.

"I don't know." I shake my head. What would it look like if something happened with us? "Maybe we can just have some fun," I say, though I have no idea how that would work.

It was weird, maybe, to have said all of those things out loud to my best friend. And I still don't have any idea how that would work, even with all

the back and forth my mind has been doing since that conversation. But maybe it wouldn't hurt to try and find out.

I pull myself out of my thoughts and turn to look at a photo I have sitting on my desk. It's one of Nate and me when we were young, a favorite of mine, from back when life was easy. We had gone on a family vacation to the beach. I remember my mom taking the picture. We were at the line of the ocean where the waves were just coming in, the water kissing our toes, and Nate was bent over because I had just jumped on his back for a piggyback ride. We were both laughing, big smiles with missing teeth and wind-blown hair that could only have come from the ocean breeze.

I'm suddenly overcome with emotion, and tears sting my eyes. Grief is an asshole. It attacks whenever it wants to, seeping in and darkening every corner of your brain. I miss my brother. So many times, I'm angry with him for the choice he made to drive when he was so messed up. Other times, I'm just sad that I lost someone so important to me. I'm sad that we won't progress through life together, the way brothers should. I swipe a tear away and shake my head. Standing up, I put the frame back on my shelf and reach for my phone.

I need something to distract me, and I'm just hungry enough that food might do the trick. The diner's my go-to at times like this, and so I quickly change into a pair of black jeans and a black T-shirt, covered with my Punisher sweatshirt. I slide on my black Vans and grab my barbed wire necklace and put it on. I throw on my silver rings. Then I hop in my car and drive myself there.

When I get to the diner, I'm glad it's not busy. Mondays seem to be their quietest day, which is perfect for what I need right now. I walk farther in and grab a spot at the counter. Lindsey is there at the opposite side of the row of seats, farthest from where I sat, and she greets me with a smile and starts over toward me.

"Hey, Dare! How are things?" She sets water and some silverware in front of me, then hands me a menu but freezes when she sees my face. "Yikes, buddy." She gives me a soft smile.

I don't know if or what Lev has told her about the last few days, so I just shrug and say, "Eh, it looks worse than it feels."

She shakes her head. "I heard what happened. I appreciate you standing up for Keira. I know she appreciates it too." She smiles at me warmly. "Anyway, do you know what you want?"

I appreciate her not making anything awkward, and so I give my order for dinner. I pull out my phone as she walks away. I'm about halfway through my sandwich when I hear a voice next to me. Its smooth tenor flows through my veins, warming me from head to toe.

"Hey, Dare."

My stomach is instantly in my throat, and my head turns to the side. Lev is sliding onto the counter seat, settling with his legs spread as he barely manages to fit himself under the counter. God, he's so good-looking. He's wearing a leather jacket, which is sexy as hell, and I immediately recognize his scent. I think it's my new favorite smell. My mouth goes dry, and my heart starts racing.

I try to answer, but I seem to have turned into some tongue-tied weirdo all of a sudden, and that's not me at all.

Mentally shaking myself, I force what I hope is a sly smile. "What are you doing here?" I pop a french fry in my mouth and tell myself I have to chew and swallow. *Do NOT choke, Dare. Do not choke.* I manage to get the fry down and take a big gulp of my drink to help it.

Before he can answer, Lindsey comes over to us, a grin on her face that means nothing but trouble. "Well, *hiiiiii*, Lev!" she croons. "Whatever brings you in tonight?" She giggles as I roll my eyes, smirking at her.

It's almost too obvious that she must have messaged him that I was here when she was putting my order in. Lev just shakes his head, but his cheeks are flushed and he can't quite meet my eyes.

Lindsey giggles again, then sobers up a bit. "What do you want to eat, brother?"

Lev orders, and she grins at him again before tapping the counter between us and walking away. We sit in silence for a few minutes as I struggle to take another bite of my sandwich. My heart is still in my throat. I chew and swallow, then grab my water and take another big gulp. I feel like I should be saying something to him, but I am not sure what to say and the silence is awkward.

When I finally glance over at him, Lev's smirking knowingly at me. "How is your face feeling?" he asks.

I shrug. "It's okay. I'm sore, but it's manageable. Am I pretty again?" I tease.

Lev chuckles. "Always."

My stomach flips, and my face heats up.

Lindsey brings Lev's food and sets it down in front of him. "Enjoy," she tells her brother. I don't miss that she sends Lev a wink. His cheeks pinken again, and I shake my head. Lindsey turns and disappears through the doors into the kitchen. I can't help but smirk.

"How was today?" Lev breaks the silence between us. He picks up his burger and takes a big bite.

I turn my head and watch his strong jaw move as he chews, and I swallow hard and turn back to my food. Why is that so sexy? "I worked," I choke out, coughing and clearing my throat.

"So full of words," he teases, taking a drink of his soda.

"What?" I say. "I worked. Drew up some prints, came up with a campaign." I'm not telling him about my walk down Memory Lane with Nate. "What did *you* do?" I ask cheekily.

"Worked," Lev mocks back, a smile spreading across his face and that dimple sinking deep. If I knew it wouldn't bother him, I would lean over and stick my tongue into it. I love it that much.

Not much more is said, and we eat in a comfortable yet charged silence. When Lindsey brings over our checks, she puts mine in front of me and Lev's in front of him. He reaches out and grabs both of them.

"Dude," I say, reaching for mine.

"I got it," he says, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket.

My racing heart stutters. He wants to pay for my dinner. Why?

He pulls out several bills and lays them down, and I shake my head to force myself out of the daze.

"I can pay for my own dinner," I insist, my eyes meeting his glistening blue ones.

"I know you can," he says. "But let me get this. I want to. Consider it our first unofficial date."

A little gasp leaves me. As I go to protest, Lindsey shows up and grabs the two twenty-dollar bills and the two checks before disappearing.

I shake my head again. "You really don't have to do that," I tell him.

"I know," he answers. "But let me." He says it with such finality that I know I'm not going to win the argument.

When Lindsey comes back with his change, he lays another twenty down and turns his entire body toward me.

I smirk at him. "Thank you," I say as I stand up.

He stands at the same time and crowds me, making my heartbeat skyrocket. I swear it's going to beat right out of my chest.

"Come on," he says softly. Turning, he waves to his sister and walks to the door.

I do the same. I'm following him like a lost puppy. I can't help but wonder what's happening and why. Outside, the air is crisp, and the sun is starting to set, although there's probably still another forty minutes of dusk. Lev's car isn't in the lot, and instead, he starts heading to his bike, which is parked not far away. I begin to peel off and head toward my car when Lev's voice stops me.

"Wanna go for a ride?"

I'm pretty sure my heart stops beating completely. My traitorous heart. A ride? A ride. On Lev's bike, behind him, my arms wrapped around him. "Really?" I ask, a little too eagerly.

"Really," he says, holding out a helmet to me.

I hesitate for only a moment before stepping over to him. Then I reach out and tentatively take the helmet out of his hand.

He's putting his helmet on when I ask, "You sure we can both be on it?"

A deep chuckle rumbles through his chest, and goose bumps erupt on my arms and neck.

"Yes. We can both be on it." He throws his leg over, and I take a second to admire this scene. Thick, jean-clad thighs straddle the bike. His strong hands hold onto the handlebars, and his amazing ass is sitting on the leather seat. It's breathtaking. He's breathtaking. Lev notices me staring at him and smiles. "Stop gawking and get on." He moves up on the seat as far as he can safely sit, and I approach the motorcycle. "Just throw your leg around and settle in the middle. You can hold onto me."

I do as I'm told, my throat dry as I climb on the bike. I put the helmet on and sit there, my hands on my thighs. I'm not super comfortable with this, and as much as I want to do it, my stomach is churning. I don't know if it's because it's my first time on a motorcycle or if it's because I'm going to be holding onto Lev, getting to be this close to him again.

He starts the bike, and I feel the power come alive underneath me. My body vibrates to my core, and everything inside me lights up. Lev turns toward me and yells, "Put your feet on those little bars sticking out of the sides. You have to put your arms around me and hold on."

I tentatively reach my arms forward and on either side of his torso, not sure where to hold on or what to expect.

“And see those big pipes? Keep your legs away from them.”

I nod when I realize what he’s talking about.

“Ready?” he yells, and I nod again. Lev starts forward, and I lurch back. The movement causes me to instinctively wrap my arms all the way around his torso and stomach, tightly. I think I feel him laugh. Then, I notice how hard and muscular he is. Not that I didn’t notice this when we hooked up recently. But this? I can feel every line and ridge and bump. His body is cut. I have muscle, but Lev is thick.

Lev picks up speed as we get out on the roadway. I’m holding him so tightly, my chest pressed against his back and his ass in my groin. Blood rushes to my cock, and a semi starts to form. I try to will it away, but being this close to Lev makes it impossible. The chilly night air whips around us, and it feels so . . . freeing. I totally understand now why people love this. Maybe it’s just because I’m with Lev, but either way, it’s an amazing feeling.

We ride around for a while. Some of the roads he takes are back roads with twists and turns, and others are main roads that we have to take to get where we want to go. As the sun starts to set even further on the horizon, we end up at the lake. I know it’s not that far from the diner, and I smile at the fact that he took several long ways around to give us more time on the bike.

The engine shuts off, and he removes his helmet, turning to gaze out over the water where the sun is kissing the lake’s end. He gets off the motorcycle as I remove my helmet and hand it to him, a smirk on my face.

Look at this. Lev Richardson is a romantic.

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Chapter 23

Levon

"That was freaking awesome," Dare says, beaming as he hands me his helmet.

"Yeah? You see it now, don't you," I tease.

Dare nods. "It's really fun." He chuckles. "I get it."

It was more than just fun. It was maybe the best bike ride I've had in a while, though he doesn't need to know that.

Dusk is rolling in fast now, and the sun is going down on the horizon. There's a beautiful yellowish orange tint to the sunset tonight, and I can't help thinking how gorgeous it looks. I'm not exactly sure why I brought us here, to the lake. Maybe I'm hoping to have a second chance after last time, when things were awkward and didn't end the way I wanted?

I hang Darian's helmet on the handle, opposite mine, and I turn toward him while he's still sitting on my bike. My eyes roam over his body. He's just gorgeous, and seeing him on my bike, framed by the sunset, does something to me. I can still feel his arms around my torso as we rode.

My cock instantly stirs, and I give him a smile. “You look really good on my bike,” I say. I know it’s getting dark, but I think I see him blush. I move closer to his side, and he turns to look at me, licking his lips. I lean in and kiss him. His lips are warm and soft. He kisses me back gently. There’s nothing rushed or hurried about it, but it warms my blood from my head to my toes.

When I pull away, I look at my hand on his thigh. He looks down at it, too, and then up at me again, another smile on his face. I step back a little to give him room to get off but reach out my hand to help. He slips his hand into mine as he throws his leg around the back of the bike. Our fingers intertwine, and I help steady him when his feet hit the ground. Together, we walk to the dock. He’s wearing rings tonight, and the feel against my fingers is smooth and cold. The fact that his rings are colder because he was holding onto me on the bike as we rode affects me more than it should.

I sit down at the end of the dock so we can see the sun going below the horizon, and when I tug gently on his hand, he sits beside me. Our knees are touching, and he takes my hand and puts it back on his thigh. I smile to myself. He’s quiet tonight, but these silent communications feel so special . . . almost intimate. I wonder if something is bothering him or if he just doesn’t feel like talking. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing thoughts.

We sit in silence for a while, and I start to rub his leg. He sighs a peaceful sigh and looks up to the sky. His eyes close, and then he turns toward me and opens them again, those stunning emerald-green orbs gazing back at me.

We silently meet in the middle, our lips crashing together. I moan into his mouth after I feel his lip ring rub my top lip. His bottom lip fits perfectly between mine, and I give it a gentle tug. I shift my body so that I’m at a better angle and crawl over him. He takes my jacket and pulls me slowly down on top of him as he lies back on the dock. It’s a full invitation to what he wants. Our lips never separate.

Bracing myself with my hands on either side of his shoulders, I move my head so I can get a deeper kiss. He opens his lips for me, and our tongues meet. Our kiss turns more rushed and frantic, and we lick and taste one another, breathing heavily. I lower myself down to my elbows, which puts our bodies much closer, and I grind against him. Dare moans as my now-hard dick presses against his groin, and I feel his hardness under me.

It’s truly amazing, how responsive he is to my body. He’s rock-hard against his jeans, and I know it can’t be comfortable for him because I’m not comfortable either. I push up and move my lips down Dare’s cheek, placing open-mouthed kisses over the curve of his jaw and down his neck. He lifts his chin and takes a quivering breath as I move my way down, kissing and licking and sucking his skin, and he grinds into me harder with every movement.

“God,” he breathes, his hands slipping under my coat and rubbing up my back. I kiss farther down and let my hands wander down to the hem of his sweatshirt and then his T-shirt. Without hesitation, I push his sweatshirt up and skip over the bunched-up material until my lips find his bare chest. He groans and grips my shirt.

One of Dare’s legs comes up along the side of my hip, and he presses into me. He’s breathing so heavily, and I’m so fucking turned on. I lick his pec and swirl my tongue over his nipple. He. Fucking. Whimpers. And I’m a goner. I move to his other nipple, pressing my entire mouth over it and kissing it before I pull off. Then I lick back over to the other side again, repeating the action.

Dare writhes underneath me. “More,” he whispers, his voice rough and desperate. “I need more.”

I kiss down his stomach. He has abs but he has a little softness there, too. It’s fucking perfect. He bucks his hips, and his hands fly to my hair as I lick and breathe over his belly button. I lean to one side and start making work of his belt and the button on his jeans. My lips don’t leave his body, and I feel goose bumps erupt on him, under my kisses.

I manage to get his button undone with one hand, and he helps me pull his pants down. He lifts his hips so I can pull them below his ass, and I grip the flesh on the side of his butt and squeeze. He exhales heavily.

“Uuhhhhggh, Lev,” he sighs.

My cock aches as I kiss down the soft line of dark hair that leads to his hard—and rather impressive—dick. I stop for a split second and look up at him. He’s staring down at me, threading his fingers through my hair.

“Can I?” I ask in a whisper.

“Fuck yes,” he replies, pushing his hips up in invitation.

His dick is so hard it’s lying on his stomach. I take one hand and grip the base, lifting it so I can take control. I’m dying to taste him. A bead of precum is dripping from his slit, and I flatten my tongue and lick, pressing

the end of my tongue into his slit. He hisses and tilts his head back. I take the tip in my lips and lick and suck.

“Ohhhhhhhh, god,” Darian moans.

I lean up and take him in his entirety, his tip hitting the back of my throat. I gag slightly and pull off, but I don’t hesitate and go right back in. I’m devouring him, and it’s fucking bliss. I hollow my cheeks and suck him, bobbing my head as his hands grab my hair, spurring me on even more.

I take him deep again, and he thrusts up into my mouth. It’s ecstasy. I pull off with a pop and take several short breaths, letting my eyes drink him in as I do. His eyes are closed, his cheeks flushed, and his dick is covered in my saliva, his precum teasing my tastebuds.

“Your dick is fucking fantastic, Dare.” I take another breath and then go back down.

“Your mouth feels fucking incredible.” He’s just as breathless as me, and that knowledge sends another jolt of heat to my cock.

I take his base in my hand and lower my lips onto him again, sucking and licking and kissing. The sounds are borderline obscene. It’s not much longer when his body tenses up and he pulls my head off of him.

“I’m going to come,” he says.

“Let me have it,” I tell him, diving back onto his dick and taking one deep, hard suck.

He explodes with a loud moan. His dick pulses in my mouth as his cum shoots into the back of my throat and onto my tongue. He tastes amazing. Salty and musky, just like I thought he would. I want more of him. I suck him through the orgasm, and when it’s too much, he pulls me off of him, his body going slack and his breathing heavy.

“Jesus Christ,” he manages, tugging me up by my jacket and kissing me.

I push my tongue into his mouth, giving him the remnants of his release. He greedily takes it.

I roll to my side and keep my hand connected to his stomach as his dick starts to soften. We both breathe in and out, getting ourselves under control. My cock is still hard and aching now. I don’t expect Dare to do anything, but I have to relieve the pressure. It hurts.

I reach down, unbutton my jeans, and push them down, letting my cock spring out. It relieves so much pressure, and I groan at the relief. I grip myself and give it a stroke, moaning as I move my hand up and down my shaft. I open my eyes and turn my head.

Dare is lying on his side, pants up but still undone. He's just looking at me. Watching me. His eyes go from my dick to my face to my lips and back to my dick again. He's pulling his bottom lip between his teeth. He has no idea what that does to me.

"Touch me, Dare," I say. "If I don't come soon, I'm going to explode."

He reaches his hand over to my shaft with a glint in his eye. I'm so hard and dripping so much precum that he palms the head and pulls some of the liquid down over me to get me slick. He starts stroking me, and I know it's not going to take long. His silver rings create a cold contrast to my hot skin, and the feeling is somehow more intense than I'm used to. I reach up and cup Dare's cheek, rubbing my thumb gently over his cheekbone. The moment doesn't last long, however, because with just a couple more strokes, my spine tingles and my balls draw up and I come. Hard.

"Fuuucckkkk," I roar, ropes of cum squirting out of my tip and all over my stomach and Dare's hand. I grab his thigh and squeeze as the rest of my orgasm passes and then my body goes slack.

When I can move again, I take a deep breath and turn my head to look at him. He's on his side, head propped in his hand. He's laughing softly as he leans forward and buries his head into my shoulder. I swipe my hand over my stomach and roll to my side, wiping the jizz on the planks of the dock.

Dare laughs. "Did you just . . ."

"What?" I laugh, shrugging my shoulders. "It'll rain and wash it away. It's on the *side* of the dock." I pull my shirt down as I roll over to my back and tuck myself back into my jeans.

"Gross," he says with a laugh. Dare settles into the crook of my side, his head on my chest. "I hope we didn't get any splinters in our butt cheeks."

I chuckle and kiss the top of his head. "I hope no one was out taking a casual stroll and heard that!" We both erupt into laughter.

It's dark now, and the cool evening air is blowing in over the lake. He pushes in closer to me, cuddling up to my side and draping his arm over my midsection. I rub my hand up and down his back as we lie there, the stars above, water lapping at the dock and the sun fully set. We don't talk. We just enjoy this moment.

I don't even know how much time passes before my back starts to become uncomfortable on the hard planks of wood. I try to shift my knees up and twist a little, but it doesn't help. I know it's time to get up.

Dare seems to be feeling it too. He groans and sits up, pushing his hair back from his face. He looks peaceful and sated. I sit up, too, leaning in and giving him a quick peck on the lips. We both stand up, and I brush off what I can reach of my back and butt, then turn to him.

"You ready?"

He nods yes but says, "Not really . . ."

I smile at him and take his hand. We intertwine our fingers and walk back toward the motorcycle together. After he puts his helmet on and we both get back on the bike, I turn to him.

"My place?" I ask. A sparkle lights up his eyes as he nods. "Hold on," I tell him, and he pushes his body against mine tightly and splays his hands out along my stomach and chest. He slips his fingers under my shirt and rests them on my bare skin, sending a shiver through me. I push back so my ass connects with his groin again, and he pulls in closer. We're probably about as close as two people can possibly be.

The air is much colder now, and the ride home has a bit of a chill to it. But it's a short drive, giving me just enough time to think about how easily Dare agreed to come back to my place. I mean, I'm happy about it, and I really want to spend more time with him, but I wasn't sure he felt the same way.

When we reach the parking lot at my apartment complex, I park my bike, and we get off and remove our helmets. I sort of want to cover the bike, but it's still too warm and it's not supposed to rain, which means it should be fine if I wait for tomorrow. I have much more important things to pay attention to.

Dare follows me to my apartment, and I let him in, then close and lock the door behind us. I take a quick detour to the kitchen and grab a couple of bottles of water for us from the fridge. He thanks me when I hand him one and just stands in the hallway, awkwardly.

Stepping toward him, I ask "Do you . . . want to stay out here or maybe watch something in bed?" I move even closer, until his body is pressed against mine, and then I nuzzle my nose into his neck and inhale. He smells so good. Like fresh air and deodorant and just . . . him. I kiss his neck and work my way back to his jaw, sticking my tongue out and flicking his lip ring. He smiles into my kiss.

When I pull back enough, he says, "The bed is fine."

I take his hand and lead him into my room. We both set our bottles of water on the nightstand next to my bed, and then I tug him in for another quick kiss. He groans, and when we part, I tip my head toward the bathroom.

“I’m going to wash off,” I say. “I’ll just be a few minutes.”

He nods, and I go take a quick shower, cleaning the remnants of our time together at the lake off of my stomach. When I get back into my bedroom, Dare is already under the covers, and he watches me as I walk toward him and crawl into bed. I take a moment to prop up the pillows so we can see the TV better and then try to find a movie or something. However, as I get settled, Dare awkwardly faces me, and I can tell something is bothering him.

“Hey,” I say quietly, reaching over and moving a strand of his unruly black hair out of his face.

He puts his hands under his cheek and rests his head on them on the pillow. “Hey yourself,” he says back, just as quietly.

“You okay?” I ask.

His emerald-green eyes search my face and run up and down my torso. He meets my gaze again and shrugs a shoulder. “Yeah.”

I don’t know how to handle him like this. I’m not sure if this is normal for him or if he’s upset about something or if I pushed it too far tonight. I give myself a second, then I say, “Dare.”

He looks back at me again, and I turn my body to face him so I can see him a little bit more closely.

“Did I . . . Was tonight . . . I didn’t take it too far tonight, did I?” I ask.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “No, Lev. You didn’t take it too far tonight. It was amazing. Maybe . . . too good,” he says, rolling on to his back.

I can’t help the smile that grows on my face. “I enjoyed it,” I say, licking my lips. He gives me a sheepish grin. “I’m into you,” I tell him. My heart is pounding out of my chest with my confession, and he closes his eyes. “I know that maybe it’s weird or uncomfortable or whatever because of Na—”

His eyes snap open, and he bolts up in bed. “Don’t,” he says firmly.

“I—”

“Don’t, okay? I know what you’re going to say and where your head is because mine’s there too. Just please, don’t.”

His reaction catches me off guard a little, and I swallow and furrow my brow. “Okay, I’m not—”

“Let’s just go to sleep, okay?”

I didn’t realize that talking about Nate was going to be so upsetting to him. I make a mental note to approach that topic with more sensitivity next time. I was going to tell him that I hope he’s okay with the fact that we’re doing this and that I’m pretty sure Nate would be happy to know his brother and best friend reconnected. Clearly he didn’t want to talk about it.

My chest hurts as I turn off the light and settle into bed. I reach over and pull him close to me. “I have to get up early for work tomorrow,” I manage. “You can stay as long as you need to.”

He mumbles a quiet “’kay” and closes his eyes as he curls up into me. I’m not quite sure what to think, exactly, but I hold him tight and let the slow, rhythmic sound of his breathing lull me to sleep.

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Chapter 24

Darian

When I wake up the next morning, I quickly realize I'm not in my own bed. I crack my eyes open and give myself a few minutes to wake up fully. The bed next to me is cold, but it's not until I roll over and notice Lev isn't here with me that I remember him saying something about needing to be at work early today.

The conversation we had just before we went to sleep comes crashing back into me, and I close my eyes for a minute, bracing against the memory. Yeah, I know I have my walls up. As much as I like him, there's just so much history between us, and I can't let it all go. But the huge crush I had on him as a kid was just that—a crush—and now we're adults, doing *very* adult things. Of course it's bound to be complicated, right?

Before I can let myself get lost in remembering all of those very adult things we did last night—god, that blow job . . . the man is talented, that's for sure—I roll over and force myself out of bed. Then I quickly get dressed in my clothes from last night and check my phone. There are no messages, so I stuff my phone in my pocket and head out of the bedroom to the kitchen.

There’s a brown bag on the table and a note beside it, along with a clean, empty travel mug. I pick up the note and read it.

Hey.

Good morning. I hope you slept okay. I got some bagels and pastries befo
I left for work. Have what you want and take the rest home. They are for yo
Coffee is all prepped in the maker, just have to turn it on if you want som
Have a good day. If you don’t have a ride, you can stay here.

- Lev

I’m trying not to be too shocked as I read, but I really can’t believe Lev left early, went out and got breakfast, and then came back, all while I slept. He bought me breakfast and extra pastries and bagels—while I slept. Just because? This guy is too much. There’s no way someone is just that nice, right?

I also can’t help feeling like he’s trying to fix something. To take care of me. But I don’t need him to feel sorry for me, and I don’t need him to take care of me.

Ever since Nate died, everyone seems to feel that way—like they feel sorry for me. I’m the kid whose brother died. The kid whose family abandoned him. The goth kid who can’t function and drinks too much. Fuck that. I don’t need their pity. And I don’t need Lev thinking that way too.

I rub my hand over my face and look into the bag on the table. There are a few bagels, a muffin, and a croissant, like he didn’t know what I might want, so he just got a bunch of things. Because he’s thoughtful like that too? Suddenly, it feels warm in here, and my heart starts beating faster. I grab the muffin and then head outside for some fresh air, leaving the bag and coffee behind. Then I shoot a text to a few friends to see if anyone can come pick me up since my car is still at the diner.

Keira texts back first, and I hang around outside, pacing impatiently as I wait for her to come and get me. A thousand thoughts are running through my head all at once, and I can’t get them to quiet down.

I’m so sorry, Darian.

God, Darian. How awful. I feel so bad for you.

Poor Darian.

How do you even deal with that?

Are you doing okay, Dare? You poor thing . . .

He's the kid whose brother . . . you know . . .

I grab my hair and squeeze in frustration, letting out a growl. My breath leaves my mouth in a puff, the air around me cold and still. A chill runs up my spine as all the freaking things people have said over the years replay in my head. Everyone feeling sorry for me. Everyone pitying me. Everyone wondering if I'll be okay but no one reaching out to *actually* help.

I don't need help anyway. I don't want it. I just want to live my life without the memory of what I lost being thrown at me from every direction.

Keira's car pulls up along the curb, and I'm glad for the distraction. I jog out to meet her and get in quickly. Thankfully she has the heat on, and it warms my bones. Between the conversation with Lev last night, his note this morning, and my stupid brain, I'm a total mess. She notices and asks if I'm okay, which I answer with just a short nod, and she doesn't pry. She drops me off at the diner, and I hop in my car and immediately crank up the heat.

When I get home, I'm restless. I only get a few small things done before I can't take it anymore. Lighting up a joint, I crack my bedroom window. Then I lie back on my bed and smoke, letting it calm my nerves. When I'm done, I pinch out my joint and try to get some sleep.

I wake up in the middle of the night, wide awake. That's what I get for passing out early in the afternoon. I'm starving, of course, and now I wish I had grabbed the bag of bagels from Lev's table.

Unable to get back to sleep, I start scrolling through my phone. There's a message from Lev, and I hesitate for just a second before opening it.

> Lev: Hey. You didn't take breakfast. I hope everything was okay today.

I shake my head and pocket my phone. It's too late to respond now anyway.

***

Everything is weird, and I'm feeling really unsettled. Nothing is going right with work, I have zero creative energy, and my brain is fucked up because I'm upset that I haven't heard from Lev for two days. I haven't actually said anything to him, either, so I'm partially to blame. I know this. But since nothing seems to be happening for me right now with work, I get dressed and decide to pay him a visit.

It's lunchtime, so I swing by the diner and grab two club sandwiches and two orders of french fries. Lindsey is working, and she gives me the side-eye

when she sees that I order two of everything. The sneaky little vixen was the catalyst for our hookup at the lake on Monday night, so she probably knows what's up. I also notice that she's paying special attention to a customer at the counter. He's a good-looking guy. I'm pretty sure he's as interested in her as she is in him; they're laughing and talking and flirting. Good for her.

After securing the food in the passenger seat of my car a few minutes later, I drive to the motorcycle shop. My stomach is in knots. I'm not sure how Lev will feel about me showing up unexpectedly, but it's worth a shot.

When I get to the shop, I park my car, grab the food, and head to the shop's entrance. I hear music coming from the garage area, along with the clanking of tools, and the smell of motor oil invades my senses as I walk into the building. I look around, but I don't see Lev anywhere. A man I recognize as his uncle sees me and stops what he's doing. He gets up from his stool and wipes his hands on a rag.

"Hi. Can I help you?" he asks.

"Oh, I, um . . . I'm here to see Lev?" It comes out as more of a question than a statement.

The man smiles and asks if I have an appointment, to which I let him know I don't. He tells me to wait a minute while he goes and gets "the boss." I smile to myself at that. For some reason, it makes me feel warm inside.

A few minutes later, the man comes back out of an office, a perplexed-looking Lev on his heels. I nod to the man in thanks as Lev cocks his head.

"Hey," he says. His voice is as confused as his face.

"Hey, yourself," I say, holding up the bag. "I brought lunch." I don't know why, but I'm suddenly feeling embarrassed, like an awkward teenager. Maybe I shouldn't have come.

Lev smiles at me, and he honestly seems to be as flustered as I am. "Lunch?" he says. "That's so . . . wow. Thanks!"

We stand there looking at each other like fools for a short time before he comes to his senses and reaches out for the bag, shaking his head.

"Yeah, so . . ." He points to the back of the shop. "Let's go to the . . . to my office."

He leads me through the shop to a back room that's clearly an office. Once inside, he closes the door and starts toward a big wooden desk pushed up against one wall. The desk is messy, with an open laptop, a bunch of papers, and some model motorcycles taking up most of the space on the surface. But there's just enough space for us to eat, and so I step over to the desk and set the bag down.

“This is a great office,” I comment as I start to unpack the sandwiches. Lev sits down in his chair opposite me and grabs a fry. “I hope it’s okay. Lunch, I mean,” I add.

“This is more than okay, Dare,” he says. “I’m really happy you came to see me.” We settle into a quiet moment and start to eat. A short while later, Lev speaks. “So, can I ask why?”

I shrug. “Just eat,” I tell him.

He shakes his head with a smirk that shows the deep dimple in his cheek, and we both continue to eat.

When the food is gone and our stomachs are full, Lev takes me on a tour of the shop. It’s really nice, well laid out, and it’s adorable to see him so proud. *Adorable.* He shows me the stockroom and the showroom and the area where they do the mechanical and other work on the bikes. He has some really nice looking motorcycles here, all in various stages of repair.

“Seriously, Lev. This whole place is . . . it’s really freaking cool,” I say.

“Thank you,” he responds, and I can’t help but notice how his chest pops out with pride a little bit. We make our way to the front of the shop.

“So, thank you, again,” he says, putting his hands in his pockets. “I liked this.” His lips curl into a half smile, and his eyes meet mine.

I cock my head and smile back at him. “Just thought it would be a good idea.” I reach for my keys in my pocket and turn to go. “I’ll see ya, Lev.”

When I get to my car and start the engine, he’s still standing there, staring at me. He shakes his head, still smiling, like he just can’t believe I showed up out of nowhere. Grinning back at him, I give a little wave, and then I drive off, back toward home.

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Chapter 25

Levon

What the heck was that?!

I'm not complaining in the least, but what the heck? I was in the back office, trying to get some work done, when Uncle John came back to tell me that there was a guy here to see me. I didn't have any appointments today, so I was completely surprised when I walked out to see Dare standing there with a bag of food in his hand. He looked amazing of course, with his flushed cheeks and nervous smile. His fucking adorable nervous smile.

Uncle John didn't give me too much shit after Dare left, but he was curious about who Dare was. I reminded him that Dare was Nate's younger brother and told him that we were just hanging out, getting to know each other again. I know that he didn't buy that part, but he left it alone.

When we finish our work for the day and start to close up the shop, my uncle says, "So a few of my buddies are going to get some drinks to watch the game tonight. You're welcome to join if you want to." My uncle has a group of friends that he's known since high school. My dad is sometimes a part of it, but not as much as we all think he should be.

“Oh, thanks, man. Maybe next time?” I say. “I have dinner with my parents tonight. But thank you for asking.”

“No worries. Next time.”

With a nod, Uncle John heads out. I lock up the shop, jump in my car, and drive straight to my parents’ house. Dinner is fun and lively, and Lindsey is exceptionally giddy.

After the dishes are done and the leftovers are put away, Lindsey and I settle in the living room.

“So,” I ask. “What’s got you all fired up tonight?”

She feigns ignorance. “What do you mean?”

I push my palm against her face, making her fall back onto the sofa. “Don’t lie,” I say as she squeals and sits herself up again, facing me.

“Okay, okay,” she says. “Wellllllll. You remember hot server Julian from the restaurant the other night?”

I smile at her and nod. “I remember Julian.”

“We have a date!” My sister is beaming from ear to ear, and she claps her hands together and bounces on the sofa. “We’re going out this weekend.”

“That’s awesome, Linds. I hope it goes well.” I smile and wiggle my eyebrows at her. “He *is* hot.”

She takes the bait immediately and bounces off of it. “And he doesn’t want dick, Lev! Sorry, he’s—off—limits.”

She boops my nose as she finishes the sentence, and I gently grab her finger and twist.

“Ow, jerk!” She laughs and swats me on the back of the head to make me let go of her finger.

“Where are you going for the date?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “Not sure yet, but I texted him a few days after he gave me his number. He came into the diner today.”

I gasp, throwing my palm up to my neck to feign surprise. “He *did*??”

“Funny,” she replies. “Yes, he did. And he asked me out while he was there. In fact, a certain someone else was also there, picking up food for *two*.” Her eyes get wide.

“Hmm, that’s interesting.” I play along.

“I’m sorry, Lev. Maybe it was just for his friend or something. Maybe he was taking it to his . . . dad—no, what about Ryan?” She’s fumbling to try to save face so that I won’t get upset if I know that Dare bought lunch to have with someone else.

“It was for me, Lindsey.” I can’t help the stupid smile that breaks out on my face. I just cannot play it cool when it comes to him.

She freezes. “What?! Oh, big brother—come clean!” She sits down again facing me, hands on her chin, waiting for every detail.

I scoff. “There’s not much to tell.”

“Tell me everything anyway.”

I snicker. “He came to the shop with lunch. We ate it. I showed him around, and then he left.”

“Mm-hmm. There’s more,” she prods.

“No really,” I say. “That’s it. It was . . . nice. I don’t know why he did it, but it was really sweet.”

My sister looks at me, a smirk on her lips. “Heee liiiiikes youuuuu.”

I laugh out loud, leaning my head on the back of the sofa. My heart warms at the thought. But I shake my head. “It was just lunch, Linds.” I don’t tell her about the lake. The overnight. The fact that he was in my bed. The fact that I sucked his dick. I leave those details out.

“Just lunch,” she mocks. “People don’t just do that, Lev. He likes you.”

There’s a sudden churning in the pit of my stomach, and I swallow the lump in my throat. Lindsey must see the shift in me, because her teasing expression fades into concern.

“What is it?” She puts her hand on my arm, our joking now a distant memory.

“It’s just . . . I don’t know, Linds. I like him. I’m so fucking intrigued by him, and I don’t know why. He’s got this magnetism, and he’s sexy and smart, and he has no idea!”

“Woah, Lev. You’ve got it bad.” And there’s the teasing again. I just look at her, pulling a face but a smirk underneath. “And clearly with lunch and coming to the shop, he’s feeling something too.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes, and I’m sort of wishing I hadn’t said so much. But I actually don’t really have anyone else to talk to about this. The Pack is out of the question.

Lindsey breaks the quiet, giggling. “Are ya gonna kiss ’im?” She pulls her knees up and plops her chin on them, a goofy smile on her face.

I can’t help but laugh. “I may or may not have already crossed that line.”

She gasps. “LEV! You’ve kissed!? You haven’t . . . wait—don’t answer that. I don’t . . . no. Don’t answer.” I laugh at her as she holds her hands up in surrender. “Just remember that he just needs to be loved for who he is.”

I exhale. “I know. But *love*, Linds? Let’s go a little slower than that. In some ways, he makes it really fucking easy to be with him, and in other ways . . . he makes it really fucking hard.”

“Give it time,” she says, patting me on the arm. Then she jumps up and claps her hands together. “Ohhhh, I can’t wait to double date!”

I laugh and stand up, pulling her into a hug. “I should go. Good night, Lindsey. I’m going to say night to Mom and Dad and head out. When is the date with the hot server?”

“Sunday night, when we’re both off.”

I nod and then grab my keys, say goodbye to my parents, who are watching TV in another room, and head to the door. Lindsey walks with me.

“I want no details, Linds,” I tell her firmly, giving her a wink. She laughs, and I leave, hearing the door click behind me.

Once I’m home, I take a shower and settle in my bed to watch something.

Lying there, I close my eyes and let myself think about what Lindsey said earlier. She’s right, of course. There *is* something starting between Dare and me. And I want to see where it goes. I don’t know what it is about him that’s so magnetic, but it’s there. I want to pursue it. I want to go at it, all in.

There’s a line I’ll have to walk between going for something with him and keeping things at his pace so I don’t scare him away. It can’t be that hard, right?

I laugh out loud at myself. Then I grab my phone and send him a text.

Me: Hey.

It takes a few minutes before he writes me back, but he does.

Lycan: Hey yourself.

I love that this has become our thing.

Me: What are you doing?

Lycan: Nothing much. You?

He’s always so into starting a conversation.

Me: Just got back from my parents. I had dinner there with them and Lindsey.

Lycan: Aren’t you the spoilt one? *wink emoji*

This joker.

Me: I’ll take it. I’m not afraid to be “spoilt” every now and then.

Lycan: So you’re a princess?

I chuckle.

Me: I said every now and then. Most of the time I like to do the spoiling. *wink emoji*

The three bubbles open and close a few times.

Lycan: I’ve noticed.

Me: Will you be at The Copper Exchange this weekend?

I’m hoping he says yes. I want to see him.

Lycan: Why, Lev? Hoping to bring me home and have your way with me?

Me**:** I wouldn’t be opposed.

The dots dance a few more times. Then they stop. Then they dance a few more times. And stop. My heart is pounding in my chest, and when they start again, my dick jumps at the thought of having this man in any way.

Lycan: We’ll see.

We’ll see?! That’s all he has? Sometimes his flirting is so frustrating. What do I even say to that?

“We’ll see,” I say out loud to myself with a scoff. And I’m at a loss. I rarely get tripped up, but I don’t know if it’s just Dare or something about the thought of having him under me—or over me for that matter—but I’m speechless. I smile to myself.

Me: Good night, Little Lycan.

I click the button to shut off my phone and connect it to the charger. Still smiling, I roll over and fall asleep.

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Chapter 26

Darian

Little Lycan.

He gave me a nickname already.

I think I know why Lev chose that, but I make a mental note to ask him sometime. Whatever the reason, I have to admit that I love it.

After his last text, I fall back into my bed with a stupid-ass smile on my face and try to go to sleep. He's going to be at the bar this weekend, and that sends a tingle down my spine. It also means that even if Ryan and Katie aren't able to go, I'm going to go anyway. It's always a lot more fun when I'm with my friends, but I'm sure it can be fun with Lev, too. *Lots* of fun.

The next morning comes too quickly, and when the monotony of the day is done, I feel a pull to go to the inlet again. Sometimes it's the only way that I can feel close to Nate, unless I go to the graveyard, and I'm not in the mood to be that solemn today. I grab a bag of pretzels and some water, get in the car, and make the short drive. There's no one else there, like usual, and I park my car in the middle of the lot and roll down the windows as I turn up my music. Then I lay my seat back and close my eyes, letting the feel of the area surround me.

Nate and I were close. Sure, we fought like all brothers do, but we had a bond. Our mom used to tell us how excited Nate was when he found out she was going to have another baby, and from the day she and our dad brought me home, Nate was protective over me. He used to call me “buddy,” and that was solely his name for me. No one else could use it, or he would get mad and tell them they weren’t allowed, like he had trademarked it for him and only him. I was his buddy, and he used it to refer to me up until the day he died.

The grief I feel for my brother is a chasm. Sometimes it seems like he’s been gone forever, and sometimes it’s like he was just here yesterday. The anger can still supersede the pain, but other times, pain and emptiness are all I feel. We had a good life. Nate had good friends. Sophomores and juniors in high school, they were always at parties on the weekends, drinking, smoking, and hooking up. The night of the accident, they were all hanging out at Caleb’s house. I know Lev wasn’t there, and I know that still eats him up, but it’s not his fault at all, and I don’t blame him for the accident or what led up to it. My parents were pretty upset with Caleb’s parents after it happened, but they decided that there was enough heartache amongst us and Nate and Caleb’s friends that they didn’t pursue anything legally. Plus, we wanted to grieve, and that would have just prolonged everything.

Instinctively, I swipe a tear that has fallen out of the outer corner of my eye. I grab the knob to control my seat and lift, bringing my seat upright again. Then I reach up with both hands to wipe my eyes. The eye that was injured in the fight is much better now. There’s still a bruise, but it doesn’t ache all the time. My knuckles are scabbed over and less swollen, and the bruise on my side still hurts and is still discolored. That one will definitely take longer to heal.

I laugh at the ridiculousness of that night, and then I shift as I realize I’m starting to get hard, thinking about the kiss with Lev.

Jesus.

I’m at the inlet “with” Nate. I should not be thinking about his best friend like that. I move my eyes upward and shift again.

“Sorry, man,” I say out loud.

I take a deep breath and adjust myself in my pants. All the thoughts in my head start to pour out of my mouth, along with my tears as I talk to my brother.

“Nate . . . what the heck am I doing? I mean, *Lev*? I’m all messed up in the head over this! God, I wish you were here to talk about this for real. But then

you might kick my ass. No, you'd kick *his* ass." I chuckle to myself. "I . . . I think I like him, and I'm so sorry, man. So, so sorry. You know I had a crush on him, right? You had to know . . . and if you didn't, well, SURPRISE!" I chuckle again. "But dude, I think I have feelings for him, and that's—that's really messed up, right? I can't like him."

I push my head back into the headrest and close my eyes.

"I don't feel like I can, Nate. How can I—how could he and I do anything or have anything with you gone? I don't want to have these feelings for him. Believe me. It's weird, but I don't feel like I deserve anything with Lev when you should be here and be the one spending time with him and consuming his life. He's *your* friend. You deserve to be spending time with him. But . . . here's the thing, Nate. I feel something when I'm spending time with him. He makes me happy. And then I feel guilty. It's all just so fucked up."

I sit in silence for a little while, thinking. Nate was a great guy. He was the best. He deserves to still be here and be making a life with his friends and family. I shouldn't be moving in on that life. I shouldn't. It just feels so wrong.

I grab my phone and the bag of pretzels and stay for another hour, eating, scrolling on social media, and listening to music. As dusk sets and the day turns fully into night, I say goodbye to my brother and head home.

***

Friday night comes fast, thankfully, and I head over to the indoor mini golf course to meet up with Ryan. Katie's having a girls' night with her friends, so it's just Ryan and me, and I'm looking forward to hanging out and playing some golf. My signature torn black jeans and black T-shirt, which says "Please don't make me do stuff" in gray writing, are enough to keep me warm, since the temperature in these places is always too high, and I've topped off my look with my silver skull chain and freshly painted black nails. I look good and feel good about it.

Ryan has already ordered a pitcher of beer and some appetizers by the time I arrive. We eat and drink, intending to get a slight buzz before we start playing. While we're eating, Ryan gives my plate a shove.

"So, what's up with you and Lev?" he asks.

I shrug, pretending that I don't know what he's talking about.

He continues, not convinced. "Don't give me that shit. I know something's happening, and I want to know what!"

I shake my head. “Nothing good is going to come of this conversation, Ryan.” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Humor me, Dare.” He has a smirk on his face, and I know my best friend. If I don’t give him some sort of answer right now, he’s going to keep hounding me until I do.

“Honestly, nothing right now.”

He makes a face at me.

“I’m serious!” I insist. “We hung out a few times. He took me home from the bar the night of the fight because Garrett called him. We kissed.”

He interrupts me, booming, “YOU KISSED HIM!?” A few people look our way. “Sorry, sorry,” he says, putting his finger over his lips in a silencing motion. “You kissed him?” he says again, much quieter this time.

“Or maybe he kissed me,” I joke. “But yeah. We kissed. And maybe a little bit more.”

“What the *fuck*!?” he says, a boisterous laugh coming out of his chest as he smacks his hand on the table. “You didn’t tell me before now??” An older couple at the table beside us huffs and grabs their check, getting up to walk away.

Ryan shakes his head as I mouth a “sorry” to them.

“I’m your best friend, and you didn’t tell me that you have something going on with the guy you clearly have a crush on!?”

I’m smiling with little control of my face. The energy Ryan is putting out is the main reason he’s one of my favorite people.

“Is it that obvious that I have a crush?” I can feel myself blushing. “But yeah,” I answer, trying to be nonchalant. “He took me for a ride on his motorcycle, and we ended up at the lake. We were chilling on the dock, and we started making out. Next thing I know, he’s—”

Ryan interrupts me. “I get it. I get it. Oh my god, no need to go into more detail! Fuck. Well, so, are you guys a thing now? Wait.” His eyes go wide. “What about Lance?”

“No,” I answer, much too quickly. “We’re not a thing. We just hooked up, and we text sometimes, and that’s about it. And Lance knows whatever is going on with him isn’t serious. Lev and I are . . . I’m not even sure what we are, but it’s not a big deal.”

Ryan doesn’t buy it. “Not a big deal?” he repeats.

“Yeah. It really can’t be,” I say.

“Bullshit,” he coughs. “Your face says it’s nothing, but that sweet little twinkle in your eye tells a different story.”

“Shut up,” I laugh. “He’s hot.”

“And I’m sure he sucks a mean dick,” Ryan says, winking at me.

“I’m not talking about this anymore,” I reply, picking up the check. I stand up and head to the counter to pay, doing everything in my power not to relive that night on the dock. I can’t sport a chub when I’m hanging out with Ryan. But if I have my way, Lev will be on his knees in front of me the next time we’re together, and Christ if that thought doesn’t make me break out in goose bumps as I finish paying for dinner and then walk with Ryan to the first hole of the course.

Ryan and I play two rounds of mini golf, and we tie, one game apiece. He has the better score though, so he names himself the winner. He’s ridiculous. We go back to the bar and have another drink, talking more about anything and nothing. I think we’re both just enjoying the time that we have together—no girls, no guys, just us.

That time ends when we finish our last drinks, mine my third glass of water since I stopped drinking a while ago. I know I get messed up a lot, but one thing I won’t do is drive if I’ve had too much. My life is the story of what happens when you do that.

Ryan’s phone buzzes with a text from Katie. Apparently, she’s home now and wondering where he is. It’s late, but we knew she would be out late, too, so it’s not a big deal. We settle our tab and go to our cars. Giving me a half hug, Ryan says, “Thanks for hanging tonight.”

“You too,” I reply, swatting his stomach with the back of my hand. I get in the car and go home.

The house is quiet, as it always is. I head up the stairs and lazily undress and crawl into bed. Of course I’m thinking about Lev and everything Ryan said earlier. I have a war raging inside me. Lev seems to really want to pursue something with me, and I’m completely into it. The issue is that he’s Nate’s. He’s not mine. Do I deserve happiness with him when Nate isn’t around to enjoy his friendship and have Lev in his life? I feel like I’m stealing something. But Nate isn’t here. He’s gone and has been and always will be. Maybe, for once, I deserve something that will make me feel awake inside again.

I sigh and look at the clock. It’s after midnight, but I pick up my phone anyway, figuring a text won’t hurt.

Me: Hey.

Nothing happens for a few minutes, and then I see the screen light up.

Lev: Hey yourself.

Me: Did I wake you?

Lev: Not really. I was just lying here watching a movie.

Me: What are you watching?

Without really thinking about it, I reach down and start gently stroking myself.

Lev: Avengers. What are you doing?

Me**:** That's a cast of hotties. Is it Chris Evans? Maybe Scarlett Johansson? Or are you a Mark Ruffalo type of guy? And I'm just lying here.

Lev: I think I like Evans. After all, he does have America's ass. Did you have a good night? And JUST lying there? *wink emoji*

Me: *laughing emoji* So you're an ass man. Noted. I had a great night. Hung out with Ryan. Drinks, food, mini golf. Lying here and I may be touching myself.

Lev: *peach emoji* Touching yourself? Yeah? How do you feel?

Me: Heavy and thick. Turned on.

I spread a bead of precum down my shaft and squeeze as I work my way back up. My breath is starting to change.

Lev: You're turning me on, Lycan.

Me: Take yourself out.

I start pumping myself harder. It's difficult to text and sext at the same time!

Lev: Already out. I’m hard for you.

My breath catches, and I start to pump my hips, fucking my hand. I spit on my palm and take myself in my hand again, moving with the rhythm that I need to get close to an orgasm.

Me: Are you stroking yourself, Lev?

Lev: I’m fucking my hand to the thought of you.

FUCK. I quickly turn the text into a phone call. The phone rings once, and then I hear his voice, his breath catching.

“Hey, you.”

I’m breathing heavily too. “Hey. I want to hear you come,” I say, fucking my fist, my heart beating fast in my chest. A rumble of a laugh comes out of him on the other end of the line, and I nearly blow my load right there at that sound. “I’m close,” I tell him, squeezing my eyes shut as my balls draw up and a tingle runs down my spine.

“Yeah? I can be soon. Come for me, little lycan. Let me hear you.”

I lose myself to that command, and a groan comes out of my throat as warm streams of cum spray all over my stomach and chest. I come hard, shuddering with the strength of my orgasm.

Just as I relax my hips back onto the bed and move my hand from my cock, I hear Lev.

“Oh god, fuck! Fuck! Fuuuck!” His breath catches, and I know he just finished, too. “Jesus,” he says, breathing heavily.

We lie there quietly for a few minutes, just listening to each other breathe. My heart is still pounding in my chest, and I swear he has to be able to hear it over the phone. When I’m finally breathing steadily again, I break the silence.

“I needed to hear you,” I say, my voice sounding less confident than my cocky ass usually does.

“I’m glad you did,” he says. “Really fucking glad.”

I chuckle and get up to get a washcloth from the bathroom and clean myself off. Lev stays on the phone with me while I do it, cleaning himself up as well. Then I crawl back into my empty bed, and I find myself wishing he was here with me, lying beside me.

We end up talking way into the early hours of the morning, and we finally both agree that we need to get some sleep. By the time we hang up, I’m

exhausted, and I quickly and easily fall into a deep, restful sleep. That hasn’t happened for a very long time.

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Chapter 27

Levon

Walking into The Copper Exchange, I'm surprised to see it's kind of dead. I take a seat at the bar and order a burger and some water. A few minutes after the bartender leaves to put in my order, I'm greeted by Garrett, who leans his hip up against the bar.

"What's up, man?" he asks, wiping a spot on the counter and then throwing the towel over his shoulder.

I shake my head. "Just got done at the shop and figured I'd come over early," I tell him.

"Cool," Garrett says, though I can tell he wants something more.

"What's up, Garrett?" The words come out in a sigh. One of the other bartenders drops off my food, and my stomach growls, reminding me how hungry I am. I grab a fry and shove it in my mouth as Garrett clears his throat.

"I just wanted to check that Darian's okay after what happened last week, you know?"

I raise my eyebrows. “What makes you think I would know anything? I’m not his keeper.”

Garrett scowls and rocks back on his heels, holding onto the bar. “Come on, man. You were here the minute I called last week, and word is, you two have been getting closer since you came home. If you’re trying to hide that something’s going on with you two, you’re not doing a very good job—”

“Fuck off, Garrett,” I cut in. I’m in no mood for his shit today, especially when he keeps thinking Dare needs to be babysat. He’s an adult for Christ’s sake.

Garrett raises his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Look, I just don’t want any trouble. I keep letting him back in because I feel bad for him and all the shit that went down with Nate. But I can’t have him coming in here causing trouble every time.”

I put my burger down, suddenly losing my appetite. The knowledge that Garrett is worried about Dare tugs at my gut. As much as he allows Dare to get away with here, he still doesn’t want anything bad to happen to him. I feel like he may even keep him here and allow him to keep coming back so he can keep an eye on him. Other bars wouldn’t do that. Garrett’s been around Dare a lot more than I have, and he must see what’s really happening with him and his mental health.

But the fact that people keep jumping to conclusions about the two of us makes me angry. We hang out. I don’t want rumors to start that could impact whatever is happening between us, and I sure as heck don’t want to scare Dare away by him finding out there *are* rumors that something is happening with us. That’s the last thing I want to happen right now.

Thankfully, my thoughts are interrupted by Caleb’s loud-ass voice and a sudden howl. Garrett shakes his head, a small smile on his lips, and walks away as Caleb comes up behind me and gives me a bear hug from behind.

“What’s uuuuppppppppp!?” he yells, drawing the attention of the few patrons who are in the bar. He joins me and quickly orders some food with the bartender.

I’m not hungry anymore, so I push my food to the inner edge of the bar and turn toward Caleb. “How have you been?” I ask. “It’s been hard to catch up with you because when we’re here, it’s always with everyone else or it’s freakin’ loud. So, tell me! What’s up?”

“You know, I’m okay,” he says. “Things are going okay. I’m . . .”

“Just okay?” I ask, a rumble of a laugh coming out of me.

Caleb laughs loudly and puts his hand on my shoulder. He gives it a squeeze and goes back to take a bite of his burger. “No, man. I’m good. I’m working in construction. Got in with M&L. It’s been good.”

“That’s great. M&L is a great company. Congrats.” M&L is a well-known construction company in Glenrock and surrounding towns. They build a lot of the commercial buildings and hotels in the area and have a great reputation. Anyone I know who has been associated with them has been happy and done well.

“Yeah,” he responds. “I can’t complain, that’s for sure.” Caleb looks at me as he puts a french fry in his mouth. “So you’re back? How was it in Sheltonville for real?” he asks.

Caleb and I talked very little while I was gone, and he was always a little distant with me after Nate died. I know he felt guilty for everything that happened. We still kept in touch, but it was definitely more strained between us than the other guys.

“It was okay,” I tell him. “I worked at a motorcycle shop, specifically in the service department. One of my buddies there hooked me up with the job when I . . . when I left. I did a lot of fixing and diagnosing and riding. It was good.”

“That’s good, man. Good. Of course you got in with a bike shop. That was always your thing. I’m glad you got away. I know . . .” Caleb pauses. “I know it was hard. I’m so fucking sorry, Lev. It was hard for all of us, but I know it was hardest on you.”

“I’m not sure about that,” I acknowledge, thinking of how difficult it’s been for Dare. “But, yeah. I had to. But it’s good to be back.” I lift my glass, and he joins me in a “cheers.” Then we fall silent. Thankfully, it’s getting busier, and Chris and his wife show up and start setting up to play. That’s distracting enough to keep the awkwardness between me and Caleb to a minimum.

As the evening goes on, I keep an eye on the door. Every time it opens, my heart races in anticipation of Dare showing up. However, by the time Murky Soup is through their first set, there’s still no sign of him. His friends, Ryan and Katie, come in and make their way to the back corner where the comfortable chairs are. They join a few people already settled there, hugging and giving everyone high fives.

I turn back to the bar and order a drink. Then Caleb grabs a table, and I throw some money on the bar to pay for my dinner and join him. Nolan and

his fiancée arrive shortly after, and the lights dim more in the bar as Chris starts to play his second set. I still don't see Dare, and I'm beginning to think he's not going to show.

Just as disappointment is about to engulf me, the door opens, and he walks through. My breath catches in my chest, and the hair on my arms stands up.

He's absolutely gorgeous.

His dark hair is a styled mess on his head, and he's wearing a fishnet shirt under his leather jacket. No man should look that good in fishnet. His black, ripped jeans hug his legs and groin perfectly, and he's wearing black knee-high boots to finish the look. I swallow hard. The guy is a walking wet dream.

I only notice I'm staring at him when Caleb shoves my shoulder.

"Dude, you're drooling," he laughs, mimicking my face.

I make eye contact with Nolan, who has a smile on his face.

"Lev, your eyes *locked* on him when he walked in," Nolan says.

I shake my head. "You're both fuckers." I take a drink and then a deep breath.

Caleb chuckles. "I thought something was up with you guys. I've heard things."

I shoot him a dirty look. "There's nothing—"

Caleb interrupts me. "It's cool, though! You two are so different. His, like, dark goth look, and you have this, like, buff *'Just Ken'* hotness about you. I know whatever's going on makes Dare happy, because everyone knows that he had it bad for you when we were younger."

Nolan sucks his lips into his mouth. His fiancée excuses herself to go to the bathroom. She's smart.

"What's that mean?" I snap.

"Easy, man," Caleb puts a hand on my shoulder. "You can't help who you fall for."

"I haven't fallen for him," I lie.

The two men let out belly laughs. "That"—Nolan tips his beer bottle at me—"is a lie."

These guys are so frustrating, but my eyes trail over to the corner of the room, partially blocked by the stage. I only catch the arm of Dare's jacket as he pushes his hair back and lets it fall forward again while he talks to someone.

“I don’t know what to tell you guys,” I say. “Nate was my best friend, and I—*we*—spent a lot of time over there. You guys were there too!”

“Yeah, but Darian Archer never wanted to see *us* naked.” That was Nolan. He kisses his fiancée’s cheek as she comes back to the table.

“Shut the hell up,” I say to them, putting my drink down.

They’re not wrong, though, and maybe that’s the worst part. Ignoring their taunting looks, I push myself away from the table and start walking toward the back corner, where Dare went to meet with his friends. My heart rate speeds up as I approach, and I tried to play it off, but I can’t deny it. There’s something blooming between us.

I’m just not sure I’m ready to share it with everyone yet.

Dare is sitting in one of the comfortable chairs in the back corner, and there’s a guy on the arm of the chair, his hand on the back of Dare’s neck. He’s rubbing it, and Dare has his arm resting on the guy’s thigh. My skin prickles.

Dare sees me coming and smiles. But then the guy sitting with him makes eye contact with me, and my heart drops to my feet. It’s unmistakably the same man Dare was with that first night I saw him near the bathroom. The guy who was slamming him against the wall and dry humping him.

Is this a boyfriend? I know I made a huge assumption, but I didn’t think Dare had someone serious in his life since he didn’t seem to hesitate to come home with me after the lake. Of course we haven’t talked about anything yet, but . . . why is this guy here? And why is he all over Dare? And why do I feel so possessive over him? After we make eye contact, the man leans over and plants his lips on Dare’s temple.

My blood is boiling as jealousy rolls through me, and I know that I have no right to feel this way. Dare goes to stand up, and the guy drags his arm down Dare’s back, stopping just at his ass when Dare steps toward me. I shove my hands in my pockets.

“Hey.” automatically comes out of my mouth.

He smiles, those beautiful pink lips turning up at the corners. “Hey, yourself,” he says quietly.

I take a step closer to him. I can smell his shampoo and the leather of his jacket. I can also smell that he smoked before he came here tonight. It’s so earthy with some spice and just so *him*. I take another step and go to reach for him, but I stop as the other man comes up behind him and puts an arm around him.

This prick is trying to claim him. I don't like this guy.

"All good?" I hear him say to Dare, nuzzling his nose into Dare's hair.

Dare smirks at me but doesn't turn to the guy. His eyes stay connected to mine. "Yeah," he breathes out. "I'm fine." His tongue darts out, and he licks his lips.

My fists are clenching and unclenching. It's taking all I have in me not to grab Dare and carry him away from this creep like a caveman.

"I'm going to leave. I wanted to see if you wanted to come with me." I point over my shoulder to the door.

The man he's with wraps his arm around Dare tighter. "We're good," he says, nuzzling his nose into Dare's hair again.

I continue to stare at Dare, trying to keep my breathing regulated so I don't do anything stupid and start something with this guy. I have a sick feeling in my stomach watching him paw all over Dare. *My* Dare.

The asshole raises an eyebrow at me. Dare continues to smirk, now bouncing his eyes between the two of us. If I didn't know better, I would think he's enjoying this little pissing contest.

The next moment sends me into a tailspin when the guy reaches across Dare's face, grips his chin, and turns him to look at him. Then, he kisses him. *He kisses Dare*, right in front of me. My vision tunnels, and I can't breathe.

I stumble backwards slightly and turn around, heading straight to the door. The room is spinning, and I need some air. I have to get outside before I pass out.

I make it to the car, get in, and start the engine. I'm a mess of emotions, and I don't know which one is winning right now. I also know that I have no place to be mad about this. Dare and I messed around a few times. There was nothing definitive about our hooking up, and I never even asked if he was seeing anyone. We were definitely not exclusive. We're barely even friends.

So why am I so upset?

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Chapter 28

Darian

Shit. Lev looks like he's going to be sick.

I push Lance off of me, but he gives me a hard time, pulling me back by my hand.

"Stay here with me, Dare," he says, nuzzling my neck.

I frown as I watch Lev walk away, then I turn to Lance and yank my hand out of his. "What the hell, Lance?"

His hand reaches out for me again, but I take a step back and hold my hands up to stop him from coming closer.

"What the hell was that?" I repeat. I swallow back the uncomfortable feeling that seems to have settled in my throat. "I thought we had . . . I thought you understood. We aren't . . . We . . ." I take a deep breath. "Lance, I don't want—"

"You're ending things," he finishes for me. "Did something happen with him?" Lance gestures toward the door, where Lev disappeared a moment ago.

I nod. "Just a few times, and it doesn't . . ." I catch myself because maybe it *does* mean something. "I'm not sure what it means." I sigh. I owe him this honesty. "I'm sorry, Lance. Really. I just . . ."

Hurt crosses his face, and he puts his hands in his pockets. “I knew it would come to this at some point. You want to see what could happen with him?” He sounds so resigned. He’s upset and clearly disappointed. “Well, that’s it, then?”

I brush my fingers through my hair and blow out a breath. “I think for now, yeah. I’m sorry.”

Lance nods. “’Kay. Good luck, Dare. Thanks for telling me.”

He turns and heads toward the bar as I send a glance to Ryan, who clearly saw and overheard that whole thing. Ryan is just smiling at me. But my buzz is gone, and I feel like a jerk, so I decide it’s best to just go home.

***

It’s late the next morning when I wake up hungry, my head killing me, the cotton feel in my mouth pronounced, and my eyes burning. It’s my own fucking fault, though. After I got home last night, I drank away all my feelings and smoked a bowl before passing out. I’m also in a crappy mood, thanks to the previously mentioned four things.

However, I force myself to get up and take a shower. The hot water feels good on my tense muscles, and when I’m finished, I get out, brush my teeth, and get dressed in a pair of pajama pants. I go downstairs to get some water and food but come to an abrupt halt when I see my mom sitting in the living room, talking to someone with a teacup in her hand.

I try to veer off into the kitchen undetected, but my mom notices me.

“Ohhhhh, there is my Darian! Darian . . . Daaarrriiiaannnn, come here. Come here and meet my friend, Vivian.”

My mom’s voice grates on my nerves. The last thing I want to do is talk to her and some stranger. I run my hand through my wet hair and turn back to the entrance of the living room.

“Hi, Mom.” I give Vivian my megawatt smile. “And hi, Vivian, nice to meet you,” I say.

My mom, however, sucks in a breath, suddenly looking embarrassed. “Oh, for crying out loud, Darian. Go put a shirt on! Be presentable.”

“I didn’t know you were here, or I would have,” I say through my forced smile. With a tip of my head, I excuse myself and go back to my room to grab a T-shirt. I’m so used to having the house to myself that I normally don’t have to worry about this stuff. They’re lucky I wasn’t naked! I chuckle at that thought. Viv would have gotten a great show.

After I put my shirt on, I go back downstairs and head right into the kitchen. I am either undetected or my mom has moved on. It's most likely the latter.

I grab some ibuprofen out of the cupboard and then get a bottle of water and the same bag of pretzels that I took to the inlet the other night and head back upstairs. Vivian is looking at me as I pass the room, so I tip my bottle at her and keep going. Once I'm in my room, I pull out my phone and text Ryan to see if there was any more drama after I left last night and to be sure that Lance was okay.

Ryan: Hey asshole! Yeah, all was fine. I mean, he wasn't happy but he left shortly after you did. I heard you talking to him. So you ended it?

Me: I ended it.

Ryan: Yeah? Any reason whyyyyyyy?

Me: Funny.

Ryan: Did you go to Lev after you left the Exchange?

Me: No.

Ryan: Why not?

Me: Because I have class and I'm not desperate?

Ryan: Now THAT'S funny. Dude, you like him. You ENDED things with Lance because you LIKE him.

Me: I do.

Ryan: Don't mess this one up. He seems like a really cool guy. Heading out. Text later.

I sit down at my desk and put my phone down. But I'm still not settled.

I know I had to end things officially with Lance. There's definitely something happening between Lev and me, and I want to see what it is. We've spent time together, and it's no secret that I have *always* liked him. But I haven't been in a committed relationship since high school. For a year, I was off and on with a girl named Anna, but that was mainly so I could say I had a girlfriend, and we both knew it was just to have some fun and have someone to do things with, like prom and movies and football games.

Lev feels different. He makes me feel things I haven't felt before. Goose bumps and tingles that are more than just a natural reaction. He's cool and attractive, and I think I could see something more with him. I want to explore that, and I think ending things with Lance will allow me to do that more freely. The time we've spent together recently has been amazing, and honestly, the thought of being exclusively with Lev makes me warm inside. But I'm also nervous as fuck because I don't know if I know how to be a boyfriend. I guess we'll see.

I manage to avoid my mom for the rest of the day. It's easy because she's flitting around doing her laundry and packing between trips apparently. When it's time to get some dinner, she's still here, sitting alone in the living room.

Dammit. I thought I missed her.

When she's home for these short times, it's abundantly clear that it's not to see me. It's to rotate her clothing and get ready for her next trip. It's usually only a night or two, and then she's gone again.

I pause at the bottom of the stairs, and my mom sees me. She puts a bookmark in the book she's holding and sets it aside. I roll my eyes as she reaches her hand in the air and waves me over.

"Darian? Oh, Darian, come talk to your mother." She's so ridiculously dramatic.

I walk in and sit in the chair across from her. I cross my ankle over my knee, and my foot starts to bounce. "What's up, Mom?" I ask, not trying very hard to hide my annoyance.

"Oh, Darian, could you act a little happy that I'm hooome?" She does this weird thing where she's drawing out her vowels. It's like she's trying on a new accent and persona. "How are you?"

I lick my lips and try not to roll my eyes. "I'm fine. What's up?"

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. Her smile hasn't reached her eyes since Nate died. "Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. My friend Vivian, you know, the woman you met today when you were indecent?"

I laugh. “I didn’t know you were here, Mother.” I can’t help the snark in my voice.

She shakes her head. “Well, anywayyyy. Vivian has a cottage in the west of France, and we are going to go staayyy for a while.” She pronounces *a while* with a little blow on the “wh” sound.

“You’re just up and going to France? For how long?” This shouldn’t surprise me. This is so typical of her.

“Oh, I don’t knowww. Probably a month or so. It’s not like you need me herrrrrre, Darian.”

That’s the understatement of the year. “’Kay. Have fun.”

I start to get up, and then she drops the bomb. “Darian, I have been talking to your father about selling the house.”

I freeze.

“What?”

I sit myself back down and it only takes a second for anger and panic to sink into my bones. My stomach tumbles.

“Well, I know this comes as no surprise to youuu. But your father and I are never here, and we are paying for this big space—”

“I live here,” I cut in. I can’t help the emotion that seeps into my voice. A surge of panic runs through me, stronger than the anger. “You can’t just decide this. Don’t I get a say in it? What am I going to do? What about *my* life here?” My eyes dart around the room like I’m trying to categorize things and commit them to memory. A thousand thoughts and emotions course through me, even as I desperately try to not let panic fully take over.

She shakes her head. “I know, Darian. You’re being ridiculous. You can find yourself an apartment. We can help you with that. Your father and I never see one another anymore, and to have this space is just . . . well, it’s unnecessary.” She folds her hands in her lap.

I can’t really breathe, but I manage to shake my head. “You can’t just sell the house out from under me, Mom! I *live* here. Everything we own is here. All of our memories of Nate are here.” I’m trying hard to keep my voice steady, but the emotion is leaking out. My hands start to tremble. “I don’t want to leave this house. It’s all I have of our mem—”

Her face drops, and her voice gets cold as she cuts me off mid-sentence. “I’m well aware of what this house holds and what it means to our family, Darian.”

I fight the burn behind my eyes. “Then why would you sell it?” I choke out. “Don’t take it from me. Please.” The last part comes out like a quiet plea.

My mom shakes her head. “I have been over this with you already. Your father and I are in talks. I will know more when Vivian and I get back from our holiday. It’s time that you move on.”

I can’t believe I’m hearing this. How can she be so cold? She might as well have yanked my heart out of my chest. I can’t even form words to respond to her. My emotions cycle from anger to panic to fear. Then disgust. I don’t want to leave here. This house is one of the only ties we have left to Nate. It makes me sick that my parents wouldn’t want to hold on to this house and those memories, too.

I need to get away from her, *now*, so I stand up. “Okay,” I say. “Have fun on your holiday, *Mom*.” My voice drips with sarcasm and disdain. I turn and storm out of the room.

I can’t fucking believe her. I know she had to grieve in her own way after my brother died, but my GOD. I’m still here. I’m still her son. I’m still very much alive, and I miss my fucking parents. I’m also really angry right now. I stomp upstairs to my room and slam the door behind me. Then I blast my music and log on to my computer to try to distract myself from all of her words echoing through my head.

You’re being ridiculous. It’s time that you move on.

I’m so numb and angry at what she said and how nonchalant she is about all of this. This all just confirms that my parents don’t have any of my interests at heart. They’ve completely abandoned me, and this is the last step.

Goddammit.

These last twenty-four hours have been such an emotional roller coaster. I put my head in my hands and push my palms into my eyes until it hurts. Then I rest my head down on my desk and let myself sob.

***

I feel numb, like I’m going through the motions, not even really paying attention to myself and what’s going on around me. I haven’t heard from Lev since he left the Exchange, and I know I could text him, but I just need to give myself some time to figure this shit out. I’ve had to figure things out on my own for the last few years, with no guidance and support outside of Ryan, and this seems like just another mountain to climb. I need to sort it all out in my head without dragging Lev into it.

I’ll handle it, like I always do.

After work, I decide to go to the diner and get some food, not wanting to spend another minute in the house with my mom here. I call Ryan to ask him to join me, and he and Katie meet me there a few minutes later.

Ryan knows something isn't right the minute we sit down. "What's up?" he asks me, tapping the menu sitting in front of me.

"Nothing. Fuck. Everything." I drop the menu onto the table and run my hand through my hair. I'm so frustrated with everything. Everything is a fight for me. I just want a break. "It's a fucking mess."

He sighs. "Well, start talking."

I tell them about my mom's little visit and news about wanting to sell the house. I can't help the tears that fill my eyes or the emptiness that comes flooding back as I talk. Both he and Katie respond the way that I expect them to, upset and angry for me and the situation.

"That really sucks, Dare! It's so just . . . yuck!" Katie exclaims when I'm done, reaching across the table and giving my forearm a gentle rub. It feels divine.

I manage a small smile. "Thanks Katie. Yeah, it's awful. They're pretty awful." I shake my head.

Ryan is great, too. He won't allow himself, or Katie, for that matter, to feel sorry for me. Instead, he gets practical. "Is there any way for you to buy the house?" he says. "Is that something you've thought about?"

I *have* thought about it, but I don't know what my parents would say or do if I suggested it, and I tell Ryan that. We go through a few other options, but it's not too comfortable to talk about it right now, and so, I change the topic to something that makes me happy.

"So, you know I ended things with Lance," I start, getting right to the point.

They both nod.

I sigh. "I'm pretty into Lev," I finally admit. I can't help the smirk that forms on my lips.

Katie bounces in her seat and claps her hands. She confirms for me that, "from a girl's perspective," Lev has it bad for me too.

I laugh. "Thanks, Katie. I guess we'll see what happens."

"Asshole. Did you talk to him about any of this? Lance, the house, your *feelings*?" Ryan gives me a look. "If you like the guy, can you give him something? Text him or *something*. Don't let this one go, Dare."

Katie nods animatedly beside him.

"I know, I know." That's all I can manage before our checks are delivered and we gather our stuff to leave.

I want to go to the lake, but the fall season is starting to really set in, and it's a cold night. I opt to go home and change into sweats instead. After grabbing a blanket off the couch, I make myself some hot chocolate and settle into the Adirondack chair on the patio. I wrap myself up in the blanket and blow on my hot chocolate as my mind runs through everything that's happened the last few days.

Honestly, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I'm starving for some physical comfort, but I refuse to call Lance because I really want that to be over so I can pursue things with Lev. And I know that I should just call Lev. I should ask him to come over. We're at that point, right? But I don't.

I know it's ridiculous, but I don't want him to know I have more drama. I want him to see the strong side of me. He's not here to fight my fights.

He was gone when I fell apart completely, and I've spent a lot of time and energy trying to piece myself together again. I need to handle this on my own.

I look up at the dark sky and let my eyes linger on the sparkling stars. Resting my head back on the chair, I tell myself that wherever Nate is, he's around and his company will have to do for now. I sit in silence, drinking my hot chocolate and just . . . being.

I must doze off at some point, because when I lift my head sometime later, I'm completely freezing. I check the time on my phone and am unsurprised to see that it's nearly midnight, which means that I definitely fell asleep. I get up and grab my mug, then head back inside, shivering and chuckling at myself for falling asleep outside in the cold like the dork I am.

Once upstairs, I strip down to my underwear and crawl under the covers to warm up. I'm still shivering as my phone buzzes from the nightstand. Unlocking it, I see a text message notification. For just a second, my heart starts beating faster. But then I see Ryan's name, not Lev's. My disappointment would be real except the text says something that makes me laugh.

Ryan: Text him Dare.

Me: Sigh. Shouldn't you be in bed?

Ryan: Katie and I are right here, baby.

Me: Spare me the details. *barf emoji* Good night.

Ryan: TEXT HIM

I roll my eyes and put my phone down, taking a deep breath. I know I'm being ridiculous, but Ryan is right. Isn't part of being in a relationship that you talk to the other person? Rely on them? That's not as easy for me to do as it should be. But I finally decide to listen to my friends and reach out to Lev.

I pick my phone back up and type out a text. My hands are shaking, and I think it's because I'm truly accepting that this could be something. This is a big step for me.

Me: Hey.

I wait for a while until the bubbles start folding in threes.

Lev: Hey yourself.

Me: Did I wake you?

Lev: Nope. Just lying here.

Me: How are you?

Lev: Better now. *wink emoji*

I let out a short, breathy laugh.

Me: Why's that?

It takes him some time to respond.

Lev: Why do you think, Lycan?

A feeling of ease floods through me.

Me: *thinking emoji*

Lev: You like emojis.

Me: GIF of Step Brothers YUP meme

Lev: Oh, he’s a joker.

I’m laughing out loud at this point and can’t seem to stop the goofy smile from spreading across my face.

Me: I just wanted to check in and say hi.

Lev: I’m glad you did.

Me: Night, Lev.

Lev: Night, Dare.

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Chapter 29

Levon

The knot in my gut has loosened a little bit. I don't know if I'm happy that I have these feelings continually growing for Dare or if I'm mad at myself for letting it get to this point.

After leaving the Exchange, I was upset. I didn't know that I would have that much of a reaction to seeing him share himself with someone else. Part of it was probably also my surprise. I thought maybe we were moving a little closer to more of a commitment. I don't know if he stayed at the Exchange with that guy or went home with him or what happened, but I know he didn't come home with me. The rejection stung a little, and I started to wonder if maybe I might have misread the situation and what's going on between us.

When we're together and flirting and messing around, he seems to be into it. Our texts are fun, and I thought he was feeling similarly. But then I'm just not sure, especially when he doesn't seem to mind going a few days without contacting me.

His late-night texts tonight make me smile, but I'm not sure what they really mean. I don't want to just be his plaything or someone he uses when he needs something. I want more from him. I was finally able to admit that to myself the other day, and I guess I was hoping he was thinking the same.

After our texts, the flutters in my stomach take some time to settle down, but once they do, I'm able to fall asleep.

The morning at work goes quickly, conversations with my uncle and customers moving the time along. When it's nearing lunchtime, the door swings open, and Lindsey comes barreling in, a blast of cold air following her. I look up from the bike I'm working on and see her do a full body shiver.

"Baby, it's cold outside," she bellows, coming into the garage with what looked like two bags of takeout.

I stand up and wipe my hands off on a rag as she stands there with a huge smile on her face. She's dressed like she's trying for a certain look, wearing a pair of black tights, a short black pleated skirt, a white button-down, and a sweater with gold skulls on it, all rounded out with a new pair of black boots and her purple hair neatly done up in two braids. Honestly, she looks like she and Dare would be more suited for one another than me and Dare. The thought makes me grin, and I arch my eyebrows at her.

"I come bearing food," she announces, lifting the two bags in the air. "Tacos and sides!" She breezes past me and Uncle John and heads toward the breakroom in the back of the shop.

I look at Uncle John and shrug. "Might as well stop for a while," I tell him.

"Nah. You kids go on along," he says. "I'm going to leave you to it after lunch. I have some things to do at home." He shouts a goodbye to Lindsey, grabs his car keys, and takes off.

After washing up, I sit down with Lindsey at the table in the breakroom. While we eat, we start to talk, and I jump right to the point, since I'm pretty sure I know why she's here.

"Sooooo," I say, chomping on a tortilla chip, "you have some information I want to hear." She's beaming from ear to ear so I'm assuming everything went well with her date last night. "How was it?"

Lindsey sucks both lips in her mouth and pops them back out. She takes a deep breath and stretches her arms out onto the table.

“It was ahhhhhmazing, Lev!” Her energy is contagious. “He’s so cool and funny, and it was so fun. Lev, not only is he hot but he’s super smart! He’s working at the restaurant while finishing his MBA. He has plans to become a direct partner with his friend in their company.”

“Wow, that’s great, Linds. He sounds great for you.” My heart warms for my sister’s happiness.

“Ohmygod, Lev. He is! I mean, he’s funny, engaging, and a great conversationalist. We talked, like, the entire date. He grew up in Colorado and came here for school.” She’s still smiling, like she just can’t seem to stop.

“Impressive,” I tell her. “What did you two do?”

Lindsey laughs hysterically. “That’s the best part! We went bowling!”

I throw my head back in a loud laugh. My sister has always said that bowling is a great date. She used to try to get the guys she dated to take her, but they never would. They always tried to wow her with big deals and fancy restaurants. Hot server Julian sounds like a winner.

“That’s amazing, Linds.”

“Right?” she agrees. “I know it was just a first date, Lev, but it was so good. I really like him.”

“What happened to not getting into anything because of Europe?” I tease, reminding myself that her trip is quickly coming up.

She sighs. “I know. But he’s so . . . ugh! He knows about my trip, and . . . we’ll see what happens.” She shrugs her shoulders and pushes out her bottom lip in a pout.

“My sister has it bad,” I tease again.

“Maybe,” Lindsey says, a smile spreading across her face. “And speaking of having it bad . . .” She trails off and lifts an eyebrow.

I smirk at her. “Nice.”

“Ha! I know. But seriously, what’s up with you two?” I know full well what she’s asking about.

I fill my sister in on the last few days and about what happened at The Copper Exchange over the weekend. It feels good to talk it through with someone.

“I really want something more with him,” I finally admit. “I like him a lot.”

Lindsey is beaming. “Lev, I’m so happy for you. I can tell that you really like him.” Her words are genuine, and it makes me happy. “You seem really

serious about these feelings. But can I just say one thing?”

I prepare myself for her to tell me what she always does, but she surprises me with something else instead.

“If you guys are going to be messing around,” she says, “maybe it would help to know where his mind is. I think you need to talk.”

This is nothing that I haven’t already thought about. “I know. I just don’t know why he’s being so hot and cold and then he was fucking kissing that guy at the bar and . . .” I run my hand through my hair. “I like him a lot, Linds. I’m starting to feel things for him. Real things, not I-need-to-save-him things.”

She smiles. “I can tell, and that’s perfect.”

Lindsey goes on to share that she’s seen him at the diner once or twice with a guy, and by her description, it’s the same guy as at the bar. That sends a jolt of something unpleasant down my spine. She says they are not all over each other or seemingly a loving couple, but confirms that he’s been there, with someone who’s not me. The thought makes me kind of sick to my stomach, but I know that I have no reason or right to be upset.

I have no say in what he chooses to do. We’ve messed around a few times, and I’ve enjoyed every minute of it. I don’t normally do casual hookups, so the fact that I’ve done anything with Dare without commitment is surprising. It feels much more special and important to me than a random hookup, though. I want to be his, and I want him to feel like he’s mine. I think we’re going to need to have the “exclusive” chat soon if I’m going to survive this. I want to, and that really might be where things are headed. For me, at least.

Hearing about Dare with someone else has my stomach all in knots, however, so I tell Lindsey that it’s time for me to get back to work. She gives me a hug, and I say, “I’m so happy for you, sis.”

“Hang in there, Lev,” she says as I hug her back. “Something good is going to come out of this situation with Dare. I know it.”

I’m not sure I agree, but I am enjoying getting to know him again, and I hope for much more time to continue the opportunity.

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Chapter 30

Darian

I didn't sleep at all last night. I couldn't stop thinking about my parents and how they want to sell the house. They want to just throw away all of the years of memories and treasures and . . . *life* that we've built here. I don't know why I'm surprised, though. It's very much like them now to act like this.

But what I don't understand is how they could just walk away from *me*. I shouldn't care that much about the house, but what hurts and what I can't figure out is why they completely abandoned me after we lost Nate. I cried for a few hours last night, grieving my brother and my family again. I don't know how many times this has happened, but it's been too many. As my parents started pulling away, everything stopped. There was no hugging, no hands resting on my shoulder, no words of affirmation, nothing. They went cold. My mom was always hugging Nate and me when we were younger, running her hands through our hair and tucking us in at night.

I mean, I don't even remember if they hugged me at the funeral.

I miss that touch and affection so much, and I know that's why I crave things from people like Lance and Jenna from the party a few weeks ago. Sometimes I need to be touched so badly it aches. The way Lev held me on the dock and how we were so close when we rode his motorcycle were like pouring a thick, healing liquid into my soul.

But not having that, especially last night, when I needed it the most, was too much. I cried, praying sleep would take me, but it didn't. Then today, I've been moving through everything on autopilot, exhausted and empty and hurting, feeling like I'm crawling out of my skin. When evening comes and the house is dark and quiet, it's too much.

I need peace.

I need comfort.

I need Lev and his touch.

Wiping away the tears that have already started to fall, I grab my car keys and leave.

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Chapter 31

Levon

It's been a long workday, and my body is tired. All the bending, crouching, using tools, lifting, and putting my body into odd positions when something is up on the lift or a jack was really taxing today, and I'm relieved when I'm finally able to lock up for the night and head home.

Back at my apartment, I take a nice, hot shower, then throw on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and make myself some dinner. I'm happy to settle onto the couch with the remote, and I waste time all evening, flipping through channels and trying not to think about things with Dare, yet wanting to *only* think about Dare.

Later, I'm at the bathroom sink, brushing my teeth, when I hear what might be a knock on the door. I spit and rinse out my mouth, listening to see if that was what the sound was. I hear the knock again, and I quickly rinse my toothbrush and turn off the water, then pad over to the front door and open it. My breath catches in my chest.

Dare is standing on the other side, wrecked and tattered, his eyes red and bloodshot and his hair a mess. He looks like he's had a really rough day. Yet

he’s still completely beautiful.

“Hey,” he mumbles, staring down at his feet as he shoves his hands into the pockets of his tight, ripped black jeans.

“H-hey,” I reply, caught completely off guard.

He swallows and looks up at me, utter defeat in his eyes. “I’m sorry t-to bother you.” He rocks on the balls of his feet. “Ry-Ryan is busy, and besides, he doesn’t—he won’t . . . he . . . I needed . . . I just needed someone. So I came here.”

Shaking my head, I pull myself out of my shock and usher Dare in. “Of course. Come in, please.”

He walks past me into the kitchen and then into the living room. He scans the room, his eyes landing on the open door to my bedroom, where the light is on.

“Did I wake you?” His voice is quiet as he turns back to me.

I shake my head again and lock the door. “No. I, um, I was just getting ready for bed. What’s wrong, Dare?”

Dare frowns and licks his lips. “Thanks. I’m—I just—ugh, this is going to sound so fucked.” He runs his hand through his hair and grips the back of his neck.

Slowly, I start toward him, but I’m afraid to spook him. He looks like he could snap at any minute, and I don’t want to set him off. I definitely don’t want to cause him to leave. My eyes tell him to go on.

“I, um . . . I just . . . Can we go to bed?” he says.

Bed? He wants to go to bed?

I’m caught off guard again and don’t really know what to say or do at this point, so I nod and then walk past him and into my bedroom, hoping he follows me. He does. When we get into the room, I turn and look at him. He’s still got his hands in his pockets, and he’s rocking on his feet.

“Dare?” I ask tentatively. “Did something happen?” I fear the worst, but I need to hear from him what has him showing up here and why he seems so upset.

He shakes his head. “No. I mean, nothing bad . . . I mean, nothing that you have to be worried about,” he says. “I just—” Tears flood his eyes. “I’m really fucking tired, and I can’t call Lance anymore, and I just . . . I need—I need to sleep, and I hoped . . . I hope maybe you’ll . . . *hold-me-so-I-can-get-some-sleep*.” He says it in such a rush that it takes me a second to understand what he said.

Once I do, my heart sinks, and without question or words, I strip to my boxers, leaving my T-shirt on, and climb into my bed. “Come on,” I say, holding the blankets up. Dare takes a breath, then undresses down to his boxers, slowly walks over, and lies down on his back on the bed next to me. I let the covers fall over us, and I hesitate a moment while I tentatively reach my arm across his waist, my palm flattening on his lean abs.

“Okay?” I ask.

He rolls to his side and presses against me, so that my front is flush to his back.

“Yeah,” he whispers.

I pull him in as close as I can. His body trembles slightly. If it were possible, I would pull him even closer. I swear I hear him sniff, but I’m not going to say a word about that. I lightly press my lips to the back of his head, inhaling his scent.

“Good night, little lycan.” My words are barely a whisper.

He lets out a soft sigh and relaxes into me and the mattress. He drifts off to sleep long before I do, and I just hold him while his breathing evens out. I keep him pulled as tightly as I can against me, making sure he knows I’m right here, and I occasionally press soft kisses to his head and neck. I don’t want this at the expense of Dare hurting, but I wouldn’t change this moment for anything.

Sleep takes me eventually, too, and I fade into darkness, his warm body tight against mine.

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Chapter 32

Darian

I wake up groggy, a warm body under me and a breath softly snoring into my hair. An arm is around my waist, and my leg is thrown over his thigh. I feel my hard dick pressing into his hip, and my eyes spring open.

Shit!

The realization crashes into me. I'm in Lev's bed. It's Lev whom I'm draped over, his body warm and firm. Lev, who, if he wakes up, will feel my hard dick against his thigh.

I'm not sure what time it is. I slept so well, though, and I still want to sleep more. But I really don't feel like talking about why I came over here last night. I was feeling so broken and alone, and Lev was the only person I really wanted.

I'm so glad he didn't question me at all. I'm sure it's not every day he has some pathetic man showing up at his door asking to be held so he can sleep. Thinking about it now, in the clarity of the early morning, I feel ridiculous.

Am I that needy? God, how fucking *pathetic*!

I shouldn't be seeking this out from anyone, really, but especially Lev. There's a real chance that he'll leave again. He did it once before. And I know

that I’m playing with fire letting myself get close to him, but he makes me feel so safe and comfortable, more peaceful than I’ve felt in a very long time. Finally, finally getting to sleep after being restless, struggling and not sleeping for a few days . . .

I screw my eyes shut, hoping I didn’t fuck things up and that whatever this is between us won’t end like my panicked brain is telling me it will—with him taking off again.

And that means I need to get out of here now, before I have even more of a chance to embarrass myself and before he wakes up and starts asking all the questions he didn’t ask last night.

I slowly remove my leg from his thigh and then roll to my back, crushing his arm. He stirs.

“Mmmm,” he mumbles, his voice sleep-filled and raspy. “What time is it?”

I scoot off of him to the edge of the bed and grab my phone, goose bumps erupting on my skin from the chill of the room.

“It’s four a.m.,” I whisper. “I just have to pee. Go back to sleep.”

He rolls over to his side with his back to me, and I pick up my clothes and scamper into the bathroom. After relieving myself, I quickly dress and quietly make my way out of his room. It’s dark and cold, but I get to my car without him calling to me, so I assume he fell back to sleep.

My stomach is growling, and I know I don’t have any real food at home, so I stop for some coffee and a breakfast sandwich at the Fuel For Thought gas station. The diner’s not open yet, which is unfortunate, but the Fuel For Thought is the next best thing. The coffee is terrible, but it’s made already, and it’s usually hot. The sandwiches are okay, and I’d eat just about anything at this point.

I buy my coffee and sandwich and get back to my car, and by the time I get home, I’ve downed at least half the coffee. For only getting about five hours of sleep, I feel strangely refreshed. I guess if it’s good sleep, it helps.

The truth is, except for last night, I haven’t slept more than an hour or so at a time since the conversation with my mom about the house. I was desperate. As weird as it was, when I showed up at Lev’s, he was perfect, like he understood just what I needed and was happy to give it to me. I needed comfort and touch, and he was there to provide it.

Then I went and snuck out this morning, which was a jackass move. He’ll wake, once again, to me not there. But my sense of self-preservation kicked in, and I sort of panicked and did what I had to do.

My stomach sinks as I head upstairs to my bedroom. I know it's wrong of me, but in the moment, I had to get out of there. All those racing thoughts, all my emotions, my panic telling me to run. And the real, honest fear of having to answer his questions, having to tell him the truth about how I just needed his warm body, the skin-to-skin contact. How I used him. How fucking pathetic I am.

I couldn't stay around and let that happen. And I couldn't stay around and continue to use him more.

Shaking my head and pushing my thoughts away, I sit down at my desk, boot up my computer, and open my emails. I connect my drawing tablet and open Adobe Illustrator, following the routine that I use every time I log on to start my day, hoping I can be productive.

Sipping my hot, shitty coffee, I decide not to take a shower because there's a hint of Lev's scent on my shoulder and neck. I want to smell him on me as much as I can today. So, I eat my sandwich and get to work.

About two hours later, my phone chimes, and I know who it is before I even pick it up.

Lev: Hey.

Me: Hey yourself.

Lev: You okay?

Me: Yeah, thanks.

Lev: I woke up to an empty bed this morning. I didn't like it much.

Me: Yeah, about that - sorry for just leaving. I had to get to work.

Lev: You had to get to work at some god-awful time at the butt-crack of dawn?

I pause. He's right. I don't know what to say to that. My chest tightens with shame, and I swallow and type back a quick message.

Me: Thank you for last night. I slept well.

Lev: Yeah. Me too. I would have rather woken up to how we fell asleep. *wink emoji*

I take a minute to respond because I still don't know what to say. He's right. I'm chicken shit and shouldn't have left. But I don't have any excuse I'm ready to share with him. I type out a response to his text and delete it. Then I type and delete again. Then I type and sit for a minute and delete again. I finally settle on something generic.

Me: I appreciate you letting me stay.

Lev: You're welcome anytime.

I know he means it. I felt it last night. I've seen how caring and giving Lev is. When he says I'm welcome anytime, I believe him. I just don't know that I would ever be able to take him up on it. As much as I want to pursue something with him, I realized this morning how terrified I am to get attached and then lose him again. I can't let that happen because I won't survive it.

After I'm fully caffeinated—I ditched my gross coffee and made something fresh—I get back to work. I finish a few small projects, map out a few more, respond to some emails, and even manage to check out some social media. (That last one involves visiting Lev's personal site to see if he has posted anything new.)

It's late afternoon when I hear the door open downstairs and keys get tossed on the table by the door. I know it's not my mom because she's off with her friend Vivian on her *holiday*. That means it's my dad. My conclusion is confirmed when I hear his voice echo through the house.

"Dare? Darian? Are you home?"

I scrub my hand over my face and gather up my dishes from the day. I meet him in the kitchen. He's taking a bottle of water out of the refrigerator.

"Hey, Dad." I place my dishes in the sink and face him.

He spins around and smiles at me. "Hey, buddy. How are you?"

The nickname makes me stiffen. That was Nate's nickname for me, and sure, it stuck with everyone else around us, but I don't think my dad has the right to use that name anymore. That should be preserved with Nate's memory.

I take a moment and really look at the man who used to be someone I looked up to. He's starting to show his age. I don't know if it's the stress or

the fact that he's unhappy or that he's just getting older. He has wrinkle lines by his eyes, and his hair is graying on the sides. Unlike my mom, he's not fighting the aging process but seemingly letting it come to him naturally.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. I can't help the clipped way my question comes out.

He busies himself with the mail that he brought in. "Oh, just checking things out. I do still live here, son. I just wanted to stop by and make sure everything is okay."

I scoff. My parents never care about what's going on here with me. They haven't for eight years. I wonder if my mom asked him to come and check on me or follow up on the conversation about the house.

"I wanted to talk to you, too."

Aaaaand there it is. I make a face that shows my distaste for what he's about to say.

He ignores that and continues. "Why don't we go to dinner tonight and we'll talk. Be ready in an hour."

And with that, he leaves, heading toward what used to be my parents' bedroom.

My stomach is swimming when I meet my dad back in the kitchen an hour later. I decided to shower and change, putting on some tight-fitting navy jeans with chains on my belt that hang to the side, mid-thigh, and my black Docs with a white button-down and a skinny black tie. My silver rings and black lip ring are also on display, and while I decided not to wear a necklace because of the tie, I put on some eyeliner, just to make my dad squirm.

Nate was always clean-cut. He wore jeans and nice T-shirts, occasionally a baseball hat. He wore his hair short and always shaved his face. He never wore any jewelry, except maybe a puka shell necklace that he got at the shore one year, but he was polished. My parents loved to show him off.

When I decided to change up my look, lose some weight, and find who I really wanted to be, these wardrobe elements always seemed to bother my dad. He used to say that he saw it as a way for me to rebel, to show my "dark side" after losing my brother. He once told me that it embarrassed him because he assumed people would think I was depressed. That made me really angry. I just found my style; it had nothing to do with Nate. So I started trying to make my choices more obvious and more pronounced with jewelry and black nail polish just to piss him off more.

I fully admit that I feel a soft sense of satisfaction when I see his reaction tonight. He looks me over and clears his throat when he meets my eyes.

“All ready, then?” he asks. He’s not going to say anything because he knows at this point he won’t win. But I see the frustration in his face.

I nod, and we head out to his car. As soon as he starts it, he cranks up the heat. It’s well into October now, Halloween only two weeks away, and the air is completely chilled.

My dad makes small talk on the way to the restaurant, asking about work and my friends. I fill him in with as much as I’m comfortable sharing, mostly short, clipped answers. I don’t ask him many questions about what he’s been doing or how he is. I’ve learned it’s sort of pointless to do so, and I really don’t care anymore.

It’s not a long drive, and before the conversation can get any deeper, we pull into the parking lot outside his favorite Mexican restaurant. Once inside, we’re seated quickly, and the server brings us both margaritas before taking our order for dinner. My dad takes a long sip of his margarita and then sits back in the booth, latching his hands behind his head.

“So, Darian,” he starts.

I heave a big sigh.

“Your mother and I have been talking, and we think it would be best if we sold the house and got a smaller place for your mom and me while we figure out what’s happening next.”

I stare at him, spinning my butter knife under my finger on the table.

He continues. “It’s a big house, and maintenance is a lot for us. Neither of us are ever there, so it makes sense to let it go.”

I scoff. “Yeah, it makes sense for YOU. I live there, Dad. It’s my house too. If you haven’t noticed, I’ve been taking care of it while you and mom are off doing god knows what.”

My dad puts his arms on the table and sits forward. “You know it’s hard to be in that house, Darian. I haven’t been able to stay there since—”

“I live in that house!” I cut in. I have no time or tolerance for this bullshit. “Don’t tell me—”

“Please stop raising your voice,” he pleads in a loud whisper, sitting up straight. His eyes flash at me in anger and embarrassment. I notice a few people looking our way. He takes a big drink of his margarita again.

I slump back into my chair. “Please don’t do this. I know what it’s like to live there. I’ve been there *alone* for close to five years, Dad. But I’ve managed to make it work. I take care of it. I’ve remodeled some of it. I’ve figured out how to stay there and not be reminded every second of every day

that I lost my brother *and* my parents.” I fight the tears that are threatening to spill over.

The server brings our food right at that moment, and I almost feel sorry for her as she steps into our conversation.

Once she leaves, my dad takes a deep breath. “Look, son,” he says, his voice softening, “I know that your mom and I didn’t handle what happened with Nate well. We all lost each other. The house is just something that we don’t need anymore. We’re paying bills for something way larger than any of us need. You have enough money to get an apartment or a house of your own.”

He starts to assemble his fajitas, and I sit there staring at him, my appetite gone. He’s just going on as if he didn’t continue to push this narrative that we need to get rid of the house and more importantly, the memories.

“I like the house, Dad.” The statement comes out meeker than I hoped.

“I know, Darian. I do. But what your mom says makes sense. She’ll be back from her trip in about a month, and in the new year, we’ll start talking more seriously about it. I’d suggest you start looking around. I can get you in touch with an agent if you need me to.” He takes a bite of his fajita and chews slowly. “It’s time we all start fresh. Hanging onto the house isn’t helping to let go of those final reminders of your brother.”

The lump in my throat is so large I can barely breathe. I push my chair back, stand up, and walk out of the restaurant, heading to my dad’s car. I need air. I cannot believe what I’m hearing him say. I understand that everyone grieves differently, but wiping out all of the memories of someone and letting go of the things that keep us tethered to them is not the way to get through this.

I want the house. I can make it work. I’m doing okay financially, and even though they pay the bills now, I could take them over. I’ve tossed around the idea before, but I never wanted to bring it up because I knew this is what would happen.

I sit on the hood of the car, shivering. I’m not sure if it’s my nerves or the cold.

About ten minutes later, my dad comes out of the restaurant with a brown bag of take-out containers. He unlocks the door and puts the bag on the back seat. He doesn’t look at me.

“I’ll drop you off, and you can have your dinner when you’re interested,” he says. His voice is tense.

The drive back to the house is silent and painful. I have nothing to say, and I know that he feels conflicted and doesn't know what else to say to me, either.

Why did my family have to get so fucked up? We could have pulled together and had something tight and workable. We may have even been able to move forward and deal with our loss in a healthy way. Instead, we abandoned one another.

No, they abandoned me. I refuse to take responsibility for wanting to lean on my parents. They lost a son, but they still had another one. I was still a kid!

Dad pulls into the driveway and puts the car in park. I guess it's safe to assume that he's not staying here tonight. I'm reaching for the handle when he stops me, his hand setting gently on my arm.

"Darian," he says softly, "I'm sorry to upset you. We will get through this and we'll all be okay. I think it's best if I sleep at the office tonight."

I shake my head and get out of the car. "Bye, Dad" is all I can manage. I shut the car door behind me, walk to the house, and unlock the door. Stepping inside, I turn to watch my dad's car backing out of the driveway and then heading off down the street. When the car is out of sight, I shut the door and lean my back against it, then I slide down to the floor, bury my head in my hands, and sob for the second time this week.

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Chapter 33

Levon

It's been a few days since Dare showed up at my house and asked me to hold him. When he was standing on the other side of my door, so broken and beautiful, I just wanted to pull him to me and hug him. Falling asleep with him just felt right. He belongs in my arms. He's so complex—deep and broody but with this sensitive and soft side. It's intriguing, and I hope that he gives me more chances to see all those sides of him.

After a Friday night dinner at my parents' house, I crawl into bed to relax and check social media. I pull up Dare's social media feed to see if he left any hints as to where he may be tonight, but he hasn't posted anything. I decide to take a chance and text him.

Me: Hey Little Lycan.

Some time passes, and I find a movie to watch as I settle under my covers. He eventually sends me a message back.

Lycan: Hey yourself.

Me: What are you up to tonight?

Lycan: Not a whole lot. What about you?

He's a man of so many words, I chuff.

Me: Just got back from dinner at my parents'. Showered and just laying here.

The typing bubbles move and stop. Then they move and stop again.

Lycan: Sounds nice. I bet you smell really fucking good.

I smile. It's time to make a move.

Me: You're welcome to come over and see for yourself.

There's a pause that seems to last forever, even though it's only a few seconds.

Lycan: Just to smell you?

Me: Anywhere you want.

Lycan: ☠ Now how would that make me look to drop everything and just show up at your door because you say you smell good?

Me: Smart. It would make you look smart.

Lycan: Ha. Well I'm not dumb. Give me 20.

My heart leaps into my throat. He's actually going to come over. Holy shit. Adjusting my hardening cock in my sweats, I smile to myself while I type out another text.

Me: Lock the door behind you.

I can't help but keep checking my phone to see the time passing. After about ten minutes, I get up and go to the kitchen to grab some water. Then I bring it back to my room, set it on the nightstand, and fix the lights so that

there’s a softer glow in the room. I straighten up quickly, putting away a few things and tucking the sheets back into place on my bed. When I’m satisfied with the look of the room, I climb back under the covers and try to make myself relax.

Eventually, I hear the front door open and shut. The lock clicks into place, and I stretch out in my bed, my arm behind my head. *Did I just strike a pose for this man?* My thoughts are interrupted by a tall shadow in the bedroom doorway. I lick my lips at the sight. Dare stops and grips the top of the doorframe, leaning into my room and giving me a beautiful megawatt smile.

He pushes himself back in line with the doorframe and then steps into the room. I shift up a little on the pillows, moving my arm down beside me in the bed.

“Hey,” I croak. My voice suddenly sounds deep and gravely.

“Hey yourself,” Dare says. His voice is just above a whisper. He sinks to the floor and takes off his boots, sliding them so they’re halfway under the bed and out of the way. Then, he stands up and clears his throat.

Is he nervous? That’s fucking adorable.

The next thing I know, Dare’s blanketing himself above my body and his lips meet mine. I groan at the feel of his soft, warm, pillowy lips and the cold, hard metal of his lip ring. It’s such an amazing sensation and contrast. I want to feel it every minute of every day.

My hands reach around his sides and slide up the back of his shirt, skin to skin. The muscles in his back flex as he braces himself on either side of my shoulders. He’s tilting his head so he can get a better angle on our kiss.

I run my hands up and down his back, needing more of his warm skin. My tongue slides along his bottom lip, and he moans, opening for me. Our tongues tangle, licking, sucking, and tasting one another. It has to be one of the hottest kisses I’ve ever experienced.

Dare pushes himself up onto his knees, settling between my partially open legs. He pulls his T-shirt over his head and grips the front of mine, over my chest. “Off,” he says.

I grin at him and pull my shirt off at his command, then grip his sides and pull him back down on top of me. “Is this okay?”

He responds with a murmur of *yes*. Then his hands come up and run through my hair, pressing him flush against me. His bare chest is warm and hard, and when he deepens the kiss even more, I can barely breathe. I gently push him off of me, and it seems to take a moment before he realizes what I’m doing. He chases my lips, not wanting to break the kiss.

“Just one sec,” I say breathlessly. My lips are tingling and swollen, and my heart feels like it might pound out of my chest.

“Too many clothes,” Dare breathes. He rolls over onto his back and undoes his belt, followed by the button on his jeans.

I watch him as I throw the covers off and push my sweatpants down over my erection. He’s also rock-hard, tenting his black boxer briefs.

“You have no underwear on,” he says, rolling back on top of me, a coy smile on his lips. I lift my hips, and he grinds into me, grunting some primal sound that awakens something deep in the pit of my stomach.

I roll him over so I’m on top of him, propped up on my forearms, and then I lower my mouth to kiss him again. I nip at his lip ring, and he thrusts his hips up into me and moans. God, that sound.

I kiss along his jaw and back to the spot under his ear, and he turns his head to give me better access. “Fuck, Dare.” I lick him and savor the taste of his mildly salty skin and soap, mixed with the sweetness he always smells like.

His hands move up and down my back restlessly, just breaching the top of my ass cheeks like there’s an invisible line that he won’t cross. We grind into each other, both of us hard. I’m naked, and the material of his underwear is creating a friction that’s driving me wild. I move my way down his body, sucking and nipping that spot on his shoulder where it meets his neck. I flick my tongue out and lick it before tracing my open lips along his jaw and kissing him on the mouth again.

He reaches down with one arm, holding onto me with the other like he doesn’t want to let me go, and he’s pulling on the side of his boxers, trying to take them off. I lift my hips, moaning against his lips, and I reach down and cup his hard cock. There’s a wet spot on his underwear from where his precum has been leaking. I growl and sit up.

“Get these off,” I demand, pulling his boxers over his dick. He kicks them free, and our naked bodies meet again. We both groan, grinding skin on skin.

“Jesus, Lev. You feel so fucking good.” Dare is rubbing his hips into mine slowly and sensually, and every time our dicks touch, a spark shoots up my spine. My body’s on fire, and I can barely stand it.

I reach between us and regrettably have to break our kiss. Pushing up on one arm, I line our dicks up side by side.

“Can I touch you?” I ask, and he nods. His eyes are hooded, and his pupils are blown black with lust. His lips are red from our kissing, and his cheeks are flushed. “You’re fucking beautiful, lycan.” The nickname leaves my

mouth before I realize it, and Dare preens under the name. He literally smiles at me, the widest smile ever. It's so fucking cute that I have to kiss him again.

I pull away, reach between us to line up our rock-hard cocks, and wrap my hand around what I can of the two of us. Then we continue to glide against each other. My eyes squeeze shut, and my head falls forward, my forehead resting against his. The smooth skin of his hard shaft rubs against mine with each stroke, both of us leaking and creating enough lube for it to feel really fucking good.

"Fuuck Levv," Dare breathes, thrusting into my hand and pushing his forehead into mine.

Our breaths mingle and our bodies collide over and over in a perfect rhythm. I lean down and start to kiss him again, fucking into my hand a little faster.

"Jesus Christ. I'm going to come. I'm going to come!" Dare lets out the most beautiful moan as he explodes and pulses in my hand, his hips pushing up and his stomach contracting. It sends me tumbling over the edge with him. Our cum mixes on my hand and on our dicks and some shoots onto his stomach. I milk every drop out of us, stroking us together until we're too sensitive and shivering.

When we both start to soften, I release us from my grip, grab my discarded T-shirt, and wipe my hand. I roll off of Dare and onto my back. We're both breathing heavily, trying to catch our breath.

"My god," I manage, turning to look at him.

Dare tilts his head toward me, a lazy and sated expression on his beautiful face. "Fuck." He's smirking at me. "That was amazing."

I hand him the T-shirt, and he wipes himself clean. He sighs as he does it, and I think I see a very slight downturn in his lips. It's so subtle that I'm not sure I even saw it, so I let it go.

He tosses the T-shirt on the floor and puts his hands behind his head. Then he turns to look at me.

"Hey," he says, a full smile now lighting up his face.

"Hey yourself." I smile, tracking my eyes down his naked body. I haven't really gotten to admire him like this before, and I hope he doesn't mind me doing it now.

He's paler than I am and has basically no hair on his chest, though his dark armpit hair is the perfect length. I'm just slightly taller and broader than he is, but he's got lean muscle, and it suits him and his height. His hair is mussed from our make-out session, and his lips are swollen and glistening. His hard,

pink nipples and slight six pack are so damn sexy. My tongue flicks out, and I lick my lips.

Dark ink catches my eye on the right-hand side of his ribs. It's the only marking he has. I roll to my side and reach out to touch him when I realize what it is. He tenses as my fingers trace the outline, and goose bumps erupt on his skin.

"When did you get this?" I ask quietly, suddenly overcome with emotion. Dare, my little lycan, has the same Wolf Pack tattoo that the rest of us have.

My eyes meet his. He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously.

"After you guys all graduated and moved on." He looks away from me, down to his dick, now softening against his thigh.

I can't speak, so I stretch up again and place a gentle kiss on his lips. "I love it," I whisper against him. "He would too." I pull away and look at him again. "You know that's what the nickname means, right?"

I lean back and put my hand under my head, my other hand still on his stomach. He nods, a smirk crossing his lips.

Goose bumps still cover his body, so I grab the covers and tug. "Here," I say, moving back and motioning to him. We crawl under the covers together, and I lie on my back as Dare settles himself onto my chest, his body against me and his hand on my stomach.

His fingers draw soft circles on my skin, making me break out in goose bumps.

"The nickname?" he asks, bringing us back to the conversation.

My hand strokes up and down his back softly, and I hum, settled and comfortable here with him.

"Yeah. You wanted to be one of us so badly, but you were so young," I say. He laughs softly. "But you're like, goth and dark, and so, therefore, you're a lycan. Not just a wolf. But a werewolf."

Dare throws his head back, and a deep belly laugh escapes him. I thought his moans and whimpers were the best sounds I've ever heard, but this—Darian Archer belly laughing—is The. Most. Amazing. Sound. I vow to make him do it more so I can hear it over and over.

"I like that," he says, giving my nipple a kiss that sends a chill down my spine before lying his cheek back on my peck and settling in.

"It fits," I say, kissing the top of his head. We lie there in content silence for a few minutes, listening to each other breathing and gently rubbing each other. "I miss him," I say quietly.

"Me too. Every day." His words are barely a whisper.

I pull him a little bit tighter against me, nuzzling into his hair. “Do you want to watch something?” I ask, changing the subject quickly.

“Do we have to move?”

I laugh. “Nope. Not at all.”

“Then sure,” he says, snuggling in.

He presses a soft half kiss to my chest again, and I shiver with a smile, my dick starting to stir. I ignore it for now and pull up the menu on the TV. After scrolling for a bit, we end up watching a show about people who auction off storage units.

Just when I think Dare has fallen asleep, I hear him take a deep breath. “Lev?”

“Hmmm?”

“You do smell good.”

I chuckle and pull him in even tighter, pressing another kiss to the top of his head. “Sleep, little lycan. And don’t sneak out tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Okay,” he mumbles. Shortly after that, I hear his breathing change. I turn the TV off and roll to my side, moving him so we’re spooning. A soft sigh escapes his lips, and my eyes shut as I drift into a peaceful sleep.

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Chapter 34

Darian

Light pushes through the sides of the curtains as I start to wake up. Lev's warm body is next to mine, and I lie still for a few minutes, content and comfortable.

Last night was one of the hottest hookups I've ever had.

I can't stop the smile from forming on my face. I guess it's time to finally admit that the crush I had on him when we were younger was a lot more than just a crush. I was sort of obsessed with him. I wanted him over at the house all the time. I wanted to hang out with him so badly. He was one of the only guys my brother hung out with who realized I was even there. Maybe it's because he was my first real guy crush or maybe it's because I was figuring things out and he was just nice, but Levon Richardson has had a piece of my heart since I was about thirteen years old.

With that though, I realize I have serious morning wood and that it's pressing against Lev's outer thigh. By the look of the covers, he has one too. I need to take care of my bladder before anything else happens, so I

carefully roll to my back to get out of the bed. I hear Lev groan a sleepy groan, and his arm tightens around my waist. I smile bigger.

“I just need to go to the bathroom,” I whisper, propping myself up on my elbow and giving him a quick kiss on the lips.

He pulls me into him. “Don’t leave,” he says.

I laugh. “I really just have to pee,” I tell him.

I quickly roll out of bed and pad to the bathroom. After relieving myself, I see some toothpaste on the counter. I put some on my finger and rub my teeth and tongue, because morning breath. Then I rinse my mouth and head back out of the bathroom to my waiting bedmate. It’s chilly without his body heat against me, and I willingly crawl back under the covers and push my body up against Lev again.

His arm instinctively wraps around my waist, and I rest my head on his chest. I don’t want to be awake yet, but I don’t see sleep coming back to me, so I just lie there with Lev, letting his warmth envelope me. He gently strokes up and down my back, and I start slowly caressing his stomach, stopping at the patch of groomed pubic hair that teases the base of his cock. Goose bumps pebble my skin as we lazily repeat the movements a few times. I know he’s still hard from his morning wood, so I tease him, slowly moving my hand down and tracing my fingers through his nice, neatly trimmed patch of pubic hair. I scratch to the skin underneath and then gently walk my fingers back up to his stomach.

He sighs a comfortable sigh and kisses my head. I repeat the pattern, and this time, when I get back up to his stomach, he gives my butt cheek a little pat.

“Let me go to the bathroom, and I’ll be back,” he tells me.

I reluctantly roll off of him, my dick hard again, and he climbs over me to get out of his bed. I watch him walk away, my eyes feasting on his gorgeous body. His wide shoulders and strong back muscles lead to two perfect globes of ass cheeks that attach to thick thighs. He’s a masterpiece. I can’t wait to sink my teeth into those globes.

When he comes back out of the bathroom, I have my heavy cock in my hand, and I’m passing leisurely strokes up and down myself, a bead of precum starting to leak at the sight of him.

“What are you doing?” he asks in a teasing tone. He licks his lips.

“Get back in this bed, Levon. I want your dick in my mouth.” I barely get the words out before he’s on top of me, caging me in and kissing me deeply.

My hand stalls on my cock because of Lev's weight pressing on me, and I don't mind a bit. I pull my hand out from between us and start rubbing his back while he plunges his tongue into my mouth, pushing into every corner he can get into.

I suck the tip of his tongue as he shifts over me and moans. I do it again, and this time, he pulls back, nipping at my lip ring. Everything's buzzing, and my breathing is starting to get more erratic. I need this man, now.

I push up and roll him over so I'm straddling his hips, my dick on his stomach and his behind me, gently touching my crack. I rock, and he gasps, his hands flying to my thighs and squeezing. He throws his head back, and I lean down to suck his Adam's apple, eliciting the most delicious moan from his lips.

I immediately light up at the sound and cannot get enough of him.

"Need to suck you. NOW," I pant.

He rumbles out a mix of a laugh and a growl as I slide down him, trailing my lips along the smooth skin of his chest and abdomen and leaving little kisses and sucks as I go. I would love to cover his body in marks from my mouth, but right now, I just need to take him in. When I get to the trail of hair leading to his perfect patch of pubic hair, I follow a path down to the crease of his leg and inhale his masculine scent. It's a mix of sleep sweat, musk, and absolutely everything Lev. It's rugged and manly, and it makes me feral. I nip at the crease in his leg, causing him to hiss, then I lick the spot to soothe it.

Not putting my tongue back into my mouth, I lick a line across to his cock, which is standing at full attention. I position myself between his legs and make eye contact with him as I flatten my tongue and lick a long, flat path up to his tip, flicking into the slit and tasting his saltiness. I swirl my tongue around his swollen tip and lick back down the center vein. He inhales a deep breath, his hand flying to my head and tangling with my hair.

"Mmmffffuuuhh," he exclaims. "Dare—god, that feels so fucking good. Please don't"—*gasp*—"stop." He gives a gentle thrust of his hips as I come back up again on his shaft and circle the head once more. "Uughhhmm."

He's making the sexiest, most pornographic sounds, and I'm burning up inside.

Positioning myself on my elbows to get a better angle, I sink my lips down on him.

"FUCK!" he shouts as he twitches.

His tip hits the back of my throat, and I cough, gagging slightly. I pull off of him, a string of saliva mixing with his precum and hanging from my mouth. My eyes connect with his.

“That’s the fucking sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, lycan.” He pushes my hair off my forehead and wipes the tears from my cheeks. “Suck me.”

I lower myself back down, taking him deeper this time, and he starts to thrust into my mouth. Hollowing my cheeks, I pull up and suck as I pop off the top. He’s wet and dripping, a mix of the two of us.

“Fuck my face,” I say breathlessly, and his eyes immediately go black with lust.

“Are you sure?” he says, his voice deep with desire. I nod and start to lower my mouth on him again. “Tell me if it gets to be too much, okay?” he says, a hint of awe in his voice.

I nod and readjust to take him deeper. I start sucking and licking him harder. Lev is completely falling apart underneath me. He starts moving his hips, fucking into the back of my throat. One of his hands is on my head and the other is gripping the sheets beside us. He’s gentle at first, until I can start to open my throat and take more of him. He’s big, and it’s a challenge, but I’m so horny and ready for him now that I’m willing to take it all.

I swallow on his tip the next time I feel it in my throat, and he groans, which makes me hum with pleasure. We repeat that movement and response a few more times before he thrusts deep. I gag as he grabs my shoulder.

“Uuuhhffuuckk. I’m gonna come! Shit! Dare!”

He grips my hair so hard it brings tears to my eyes, and I fucking love it. He shoves his hips up one last time and explodes down my throat, salty, tangy cum filling my mouth. I swallow it all down and swirl my tongue around his dick as I pull myself up and off of him, my eyes watering. I give an extra suck on the tip which causes him to jerk and squeeze my shoulder. He’s breathing heavily, and his hand reaches under my arm. Then he tugs me up to him, and his lips crash into mine. Our tongues tangle again, him tasting the remnants of himself in my mouth.

When we pull away, he’s gazing at me with such adoration that it almost makes me uncomfortable.

“You”—*kiss*—“are”—*kiss*—“amazing.”

Kiss, kiss, kiss.

I laugh into his mouth as he seals his lips on mine for one more kiss. We’re slightly sweaty, and I’m still rock-hard when we break apart. He rolls

over me and starts to move his way down, but I don't need that. I don't need anything like that right now.

Pleasing him and waking up with him and kissing him is really all I need.

"You don't have to," I say, taking his cheeks and pulling him back up to my face to kiss me again.

"Dare, you just gave me what was the *best* blow job I've ever had. I'm not letting you hang. Pun intended." He wiggles his eyebrows, and I laugh out loud.

I pull him down so his head is on my chest and my chin rests on the crown of his head. His weight is on my stomach and groin, his legs lined up with mine, in between them, and it's everything. It feels so incredible. It settles something inside me.

I start rubbing his back, and he groans in appreciation. I take a deep breath and continue. "Sometimes, for me, it's not always about the sex."

He lifts his head and looks at me. "How can you not want—or more like *need*—to get off? I mean, what you did to me? The end result? That was fucking incredible. Don't you want that too?"

I gently push his head back down on my chest and start running my fingers through his hair. "Sex is great. Don't get me wrong. I love it. But sometimes—a lot of times—it's about so much more than that for me. The intimacy, the touching, the cuddling. That's all I need a lot of the time. I crave it, Lev. It's like a drug for me, and I don't get it enough." It feels weird saying this out loud and sharing this with him, but he's quiet, so I continue. "I love touch. Connection. Sex and its result? Yeah, that's a great feeling, and trust me, I'm not saying I don't want that. I'm just saying that sometimes it's okay for me to just be close to someone. I don't know, saying it out loud is hard and doesn't make sense."

Lev pushes up on his arms and looks down at me. "It makes perfect sense, lycan." His eyes meet mine. "I mean, I like it all. But I get it." He gives me a tender kiss and lies back down on me again.

That's the extent of the conversation, and he doesn't make any more moves on me in that moment. We lie there in peace, naked in his bed, wrapped up together and dozing off and on for another hour or so before my stomach growls.

Lev chuckles. "We need food," he says, and he rolls over off me and gives me a peck on the lips before getting out of bed. He throws on his

sweatpants and hands me a pair, which I put on, and then we both head out to the kitchen.

He's quiet, and I know that something is going on inside his head, because Lev is rarely quiet. As he prepares two bagels with cream cheese and coffee for us, I watch him. He doesn't say anything, but I can tell we need to continue the conversation we started earlier.

My heart starts to beat rapidly. I don't know what this is that we have, but I don't want tension.

"You're thinking really loudly," I say, breaking the silence once we're seated at the table.

Lev picks up his coffee and takes a sip of the hot, brown liquid. He watches me closely and puts the mug down.

"I like this," he says. I'm not completely sure if he means the coffee or our conversation or what just happened in his bed, so I wait for him to continue. "Whatever this is that's starting here? I like it."

His gorgeous blue eyes meet mine, and a small sense of relief washes over me. "I like it too," I say, trying to sound casual. I'm anything but. I pick up half of my bagel and take a bite as he continues.

"I, um, so you know that I'm gay, obviously."

I smirk. Giving him a wink I say, "I know—I mean, I figured as much."

Lev rolls his eyes and smiles at me. "*Anyway*, I broke up with someone when I moved back here. He was my boyfriend for all intents and purposes, but I ended it. I'm glad I did." My brows pinch together in confusion. I'm not entirely sure what he's getting at, so I let him continue. "I haven't been with anyone but you since."

My breath catches.

"I know the other night you said you couldn't call that guy, Lance, so you came here."

The corner of my lip curls up into a smirk as he trails off. I can tell he's fishing to find out what happened with Lance.

"You don't have to worry about it anymore, Lev. I ended things with Lance."

Lev's face lights up, even though I can tell he's trying to be cool and not overreact. "You did? That's . . . should I say I'm sorry?" he asks, a smile breaking out and that huge dimple growing in his cheek. He's adorable.

I laugh. "No, not sorry. Never be sorry for me, Lev." I take a deep breath.

"Sorr—fuck. I mean, ugh!" He shakes his head.

I can’t help but chuckle.

“Sooo,” Lev drawls, changing the subject quickly. “I know that you, um, you clearly were doing whatever you were doing with Lance, but . . . I think . . . Lindsey has said that you have sort of . . . you’ve been dating, er, you hooked up, uh—”

“With girls,” I say, putting him out of his misery.

He puffs out a breath. “Yeah.”

I laugh. “I’m bi, Lev.”

He takes a sip of his coffee. “Okay.”

“Does that bother you?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, not at all. I just . . . I mean, I heard a few things, and I wasn’t sure.”

I put my coffee down and move closer to him. “I basically just think that love is love. I don’t really care if it's men or women. If I have feelings for the person, and we’re both down, I’m open to it.” I shrug. “But Lev”—I put my hand on his forearm and give it a squeeze—“I’m *really* into you. And I like this . . . us.” I lean forward and meet Lev’s lips. He kisses me back with feeling, saying with his kiss what he doesn’t seem to want to say out loud. I feel it deep in my core. “I think I’d like to see what this is and where it goes, and I don’t want us to be looking for that with anyone else.”

Lev is smiling from ear to ear, his face completely lit up with happiness. “You’re fucking adorable, lycan.” He takes my face in his hands, leaning forward to give me the most gentle yet passionate kiss. When we pull away, I’m breathless. And terrified. I just don’t know which emotion is going to win.

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Chapter 35

Levon

So, we're exclusive. I really like him. Getting to know Dare is so fun. He's clearly been through a lot and has changed over the years, and he's just a really freaking cool guy. I melted with his whole "sometimes I just need to cuddle" thing and not needing to finish after his partner does, but if that's what he needs, I will cuddle the hell out of him. Anytime and anywhere.

After we had our conversation and breakfast, we hung out a little more before Dare left to go home and get some work done. He said he's hanging out with Ryan and Katie later. I'm weirdly jealous of that, and I know I'm just being selfish because I want him all to myself. But I'm glad he has Ryan in his life, and I want him to do things that make him happy. Once we pull ourselves away from each other and he leaves, I take a shower, change my bed sheets, and do some laundry, and then I mess around at my apartment for a while.

A text comes through midafternoon from Nolan, telling me that everyone is going to be at The Copper Exchange tonight. Chris isn't playing—apparently another band or person is playing—but that means Chris and his wife can hang out with us, so Nolan tells me to meet them there later.

About the time the sun sets, I start to get ready to meet my friends. I get dressed in something simple—dark jeans, a black T-shirt, and a blue-and-green plaid flannel. Then I make a final check of my hair and grab my wallet, keys, and phone.

The Exchange isn't as busy tonight as it usually is, but it's still sort of early, and I know Murkey Soup usually draws a crowd. Since Chris isn't playing tonight, it might not get any more busy than this.

Chris is already here with his wife, along with Caleb, Nolan, and Nolan's fiancée. They're all standing at a high-top chatting, drinks in hand, and I give them a wave before going to the bar to order my tonic and lime. A few minutes later, I'm at the table with my friends, and we share all the normal small talk as I get settled.

Dare won't be here tonight. We talked about it, and since he's doing something with a group of his friends, he encouraged me to have a night out with these guys. Even though they all know him rather well, there's an awkwardness between them, and I think the majority of them would rather just avoid him than address it.

Garrett joins us for a few minutes, telling us how happy he is that we're all here and together again, just like old times. He turns to me. "Where's the troublemaker tonight?"

"Who are you talking about, Garrett?" I ask, taking another sip from my glass.

He laughs. "You know damn well who. I hear you two have been spending more time together lately, and I'm surprised that he's not here if you are."

The other guys make little noises as they suck in their breaths.

I set my glass on the table and stand up. "Whatever you're hearing about Dare and me is none of your business. I told you I would keep an eye on him, and it's fine. You don't need to worry about it. I got it." I frown and glance at the others. All eyes are on me, but Caleb's are huge, and his mouth is agape. I sigh and address the whole table. "There's been a lot of drama here recently with Darian from what Garrett has told me, and you guys have probably seen."

They nod, and Caleb clears his throat. "Is there something going on with you two?" he asks, his voice thick.

Nolan jumps in. "Come on, Caleb, you know that Dare's had a thing for Lev since we were . . . since forever." They laugh, and I turn to Nolan.

"Shut up, asshole. He was like thirteen years old. That's disgusting." I scan the room to be sure I don't see Dare. He's not here, though, and I'm glad for

that. Still, I feel an overwhelming sense of protectiveness flow through me. “Garrett asked me to keep an eye on him, and that’s what I’ve been doing,” I say, gesturing toward Garrett. Even though Dare and I agreed to be exclusive, it’s all still too new. Hell, I don’t even know what I’m supposed to call him—boyfriend, partner, *mine*? I like the sound of the last one. But I’m definitely not ready to tell these guys anything yet, especially not without talking to Dare about it first.

Nolan purses his lips, and Chris laughs, shoving my shoulder.

“Come on, man,” Chris says, “we all know the guy was sparkly-eyed when he looked at you—he always tried to come along with us and hang out, hearts in his eyes. There were so many times that Nate wanted to kill him because he was *always* there.”

I laugh right along with them, because maybe he’s right, looking back on it now. But it’s all overshadowed for me by the very recent memories of the fun and physical things Dare and I are doing to and with each other now.

God, now I want to see him. I need to change this topic.

“Anyway,” I say, “tell me about the wedding.” I turn to Nolan and his fiancée, and he laughs. I win them over, and we spend the next chunk of time talking about the wedding planning, the proposal, and all of that sweet, gooey stuff.

When we hit the next lull in the conversation, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom, and as I’m coming back into the hallway a few minutes later, I spot the guy Dare was dating, waiting in line for the next available bathroom. My stomach drops as I walk toward him. I don’t want to start anything with him, but I don’t know how he feels about everything. Dare told me that they ended things, and I wonder how he took it. Maybe he won’t recognize me.

As I walk past him, he looks up from his phone, and I know that I’m not that lucky. Recognition instantly crosses his face. I nod at him and try to keep going, but his hand shoots out, and he grabs my forearm. My muscles tighten as I stop, looking down at his hand on me and back up to his face.

“Can I help you?” I throw his words back at him from the night I met him when he was kissing Dare against the wall.

He smiles a deceitful smile. “Thought that was you,” he says, releasing my arm. “You’re with Dare now?” It’s more of a statement than a question.

I give a curt nod. He doesn’t need to know our situation. He licks his lips and looks me up and down. Pulling his bottom lip under his teeth, he scans my face, focusing on my lips. My skin crawls, and my pulse is pounding. He raises his eyebrows.

“I see why he’s so into you. Some little crush from years ago,” he says. My blood starts to boil. “You’re hot. But so is he. Darian and I know each other *very* well.” He closes his eyes and hums as he trails his finger down his chest and to the button on his pants before moving it back up his lips. Then he sucks on his finger and pops it out of his mouth. His eyes meet mine again. “Since you’re getting what I have already had, I can give you some pointers __”

My hand is on his neck, and he’s up against the wall before he can finish his sentence. I line my face up with his as he smiles at me. Fucking smiles.

“Watch what you say, or I’ll lay your ass out flat on this floor and I won’t even think twice about it.” I squeeze a little and feel his pulse. “You hear me?”

He nods, and I release him roughly. I start to walk away but swallow hard and turn around, meeting his eyes. “No need for you to worry about him. He’s being well taken care of.” And with that, I walk away, back to my friends. I half expect to be jumped from behind, but nothing happens. Still, this whole thing—the whole night, to be honest—has left me kind of unsettled, and I’m ready to get out of here.

“I’m going to call it a night, guys.” I throw several twenties down on the table. Caleb starts to give me shit about leaving, but I shoot him a look that stops him mid-sentence.

When I get to my car, I turn it on and let it heat, taking a deep breath and blowing it out slowly. I know Dare is with Ryan tonight, but I really want to see him. Touch him. Taste him.

I grab my phone from my pocket and tap out a message.

Me: Hey you.

He doesn’t respond right away, and so I start to drive. I see my phone light up just after I turn out of the parking lot, and I wait until the first red light before I check it.

Lycan: Hey yourself.

I smile at the basic message. The light turns green, and I have no other choice but to drive home. Once I get there, I park and go inside, then head into the kitchen and lean against the counter as I type back.

Me: How was your night?

Lycan: It was good. Yours?

Me: Fine. Was at the Exchange with the guys.

Lycan: Sounds fun. Sorry I missed it.

Me: I missed you.

Lycan: Oh stop. You're making me blush.

Me: Are you home?

Careful Lev. Be cool.

Lycan: Ryan and I are still out. Kind of bar hopping. Getting a little wrecked.

I chuckle.

Me: K. Be safe okay?

Lycan: K.

I'll fully admit that I'm slightly disappointed we can't get together tonight. After all the talk with the guys tonight and then running into Lance, I'm keyed up and would love to have him with me. But since that's not going to happen, I head to my bedroom to get ready for bed.

After a quick shower, I wrap my towel around my waist and walk back to the bedroom to choose a pair of boxers from my drawer. When I get back to my phone, there's a message notification.

Lycan: I'd send you a dick pic but I'm out in pubic. Hahah I mean public.

I laugh at that and shake my head.

Me: How about you show me the real thing soon?

Lycan: Soon. *wink emoji* I'mma go drink more now. night, Lev

Me: Night Little Lycan. Be smart.

Dare sends me a selfie of him with a beer in his hand and his beautiful smile lighting up his face. I smile and settle into bed for the night.

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Chapter 36

Darian

Good lord, my head is pounding. This seems to be a common occurrence for me again these days.

I roll over on the couch, lifting the blanket to cover my face as the sun shines through the large floor-to-ceiling windows that make up one wall of the living room in Ryan's condo. The blanket blocks the sunlight a bit, but then I can't breathe, so I pop my head out again. My mouth feels like cotton, and my throat's as dry as sandpaper. I shift onto my back and run my hands through my messy hair and over my face.

God, I have to stop drinking so much. It's fun when it's happening, but my god, every hangover seems worse than the last. Pretty sure I smoked a cigar last night, too. That explains some of the terrible dry mouth I have.

I slowly drag myself up from the couch and then pad to the bathroom and relieve myself. I splash some water on my face to try and wake myself up, but I still look exhausted as shit.

Once I'm back out in Ryan's kitchen, I get some coffee started and down the biggest glass of water I've ever had. Then I sit at the island and pull out my phone. There's a string of texts between Lev and me; thank goodness I

didn’t say anything embarrassing. Well, except that I apparently offered to send him a dick pic. I smile to myself. I’d totally do it, too. Wouldn’t be the first time I sent one to someone.

Another text catches my eye. It’s from Lance.

> Lance: Ran into your new boytoy tonight. He’s a treat.

I roll my eyes. Oh man. I wonder what happened there. I hope Lev is okay.

Lance has been cool with me since things ended between us. I wish I could say that I feel more empty without him, but I really don’t. I should miss him. But I just don’t. Sure, he’s not thrilled that I ended it, and I’d love to still be able to hang out with him, but I’m not naïve. I know most of the reason we hung out was for sex—nearly every time, we ended up in his bed, sweaty and sated—and so, I’m not sure how a friendship would work. But we had a solid agreement that what we had was temporary, so even though I feel kind of bad ending it, I don’t regret it.

Whatever is going on with Lev is well worth it.

The coffee pot beeps to signal that the coffee has been brewed, and I get up and pour myself a cup of the hot liquid. Then I walk back to the couch and curl up, my coffee in my hands. It’s only about ten more minutes before I hear Ryan groan as he comes out of his bedroom, looking a little worse for wear.

“Fuck,” he says, as he walks straight to the coffee pot and pours himself a cup. He comes to sit beside me on the couch. “We got wrecked last night. How you feeling?”

I laugh as an answer.

“Same.” He chuckles. “Shit.”

I laugh again and tilt my pounding head back to rest on the couch cushion. Turning to look at Ryan without lifting my head, I say, “It was fun, though.”

He laughs. “It was crazy fun, dude.”

We sit in silence, sipping our coffee for a while. After we eat some eggs and bacon a bit later and wake up enough to feel more human, we settle back on the couch and start flipping through his streaming app to pick a movie to watch.

“The bonfire is next weekend,” I say as he scrolls through the movies.

He pauses, and his eyebrows fly up. “Oh, shit! That’s right! What are we doing? We going?”

Our town has a few bonfires throughout the year, but the one they hold around Halloween is by far the best. It’s busy and loud, and everyone lets loose. Most people go in costume.

“What do you mean what are we doing? We’re going! You know it was always Nate’s absolute favorite part of the year. He loved the costumes and the weather and the party, that was a guarantee.”

“Of course, we are but are we dressing up?”

“Ry,” I say, giving him my best exasperated look, “you know I don’t do costumes.”

“Loser,” he scoffs. “It’s freaking Halloween . . . although you look like a freak every day, so . . .”

“Funny,” I say and toss a pillow at him. I have always just done up my look a little more, even on Halloween. I’ll style my hair in a mohawk or paint my nails or throw the eye makeup on a little more heavily. But some people go all out.

“What are you and Katie doing?” I ask. I’m assuming they’ll go in a couple’s costume.

“Not sure. She hasn’t brought it up yet, but I know she has something planned.”

Ryan is so easygoing. He’ll just do what she wants to do and be happy about it. I love that about him.

“Bring the new boy with you,” he teases.

Last night while we were hanging out, I told him about how things were going with Lev and how we talked about being exclusive. In true Ryan fashion, he made a few dick jokes and then told me he was happy for me.

“You sure you’re good with going?” Ryan asks. “I know sometimes the memories can be . . . tough.”

I smiled earnestly at him. “Thank you for checking, but yeah. It’s one of the only normal things that I still have around here. We went every year as a family until my brother died. After that, I think my parents went that first year and then not again. I always go and feel like I always will. I won’t let the shit of everything else take that from me too.”

“Cool.” That’s all Ryan needs to say.

The two of us just lie around talking and watching movies for most of the day. Midafternoon, I say goodbye to Ryan and head home.

It’s chilly, and there’s that amazing oddly eerie feel of fall to the air. I love this time of year. Nate and I used to stay out way too late and long, playing until our noses were red and running and our lips were chapped and cracked. I smile at the memory as I unlock the front door and go inside.

To my surprise, my dad is sitting in the living room, watching a baseball game with a drink in his hand. This isn’t what I wanted to deal with today, so

I say a quick hi and start to head up the stairs. He stops me, of course.

"Darian, I was hoping we could talk." I pause halfway up the stairs and sigh loudly, my back to him. "Please come join me."

Resigned to the fact that I can't *always* ignore my parents, especially since my dad is sitting right here, I turn around and walk back down the stairs. I collapse onto the couch. I already know that this conversation is going to be just like nearly every other conversation we've tried to have in the last several years. We can't just talk anymore. It always ends in insults or frustration—mainly on my end. My dad hasn't been innocent in it all, either.

He starts again. "I don't like the way things ended with us last time I was here."

I chuff and make a point to roll my eyes, but don't say anything.

My dad takes a drink of the amber liquid he's holding, the ice clinking against the glass. He licks his lips. "I know we haven't been a normal family for years now."

I bite my tongue, trying to stay silent, but I'm losing the battle inside myself.

"Your mom and I have tried to put this behind us."

My foot starts tapping on the floor, and my fingers are drumming on my thigh. I glance around the room, noticing the photos and things I haven't taken a serious look at for a while. I do everything I can to not look at him.

"You haven't always made it easy for us to move on, and that's what we're trying to do, Darian. When your brother died—"

That's the last straw.

"Stop." I stand up. My dad stays calm and just looks at me as my heart starts to race. "Just don't, okay? I have done *everything* I can to get through these last few years. You and mom just went on your way, pretending that it didn't happen and that you could just push it behind you. You didn't do *shit* to help me or be there for *me*." I pound my fist on my chest, tears stinging my eyes.

I start to walk away before I do or say anything that I'll regret, but he tries again.

"When your brother died, it was too much for us, Darian. The fact that we lost our son—" His voice cracks, and I take my opportunity.

I turn on my dad and face him again. "Yes, you lost your son. You lost *one* of your sons. ONE. You shut me out and stopped being *anything* important in my life. You stopped caring about *me*. You shut me down every time I mention his name, and you STILL DO." The tears are falling freely now.

“You fucking disappeared on me, and our family fell apart! So yes, you lost a son, but you had another one still alive, and you all but forgot about me.”

My father’s face is starting to turn red. “Darian, don’t be ridiculous. Your mother and I—”

“Mom and you what, Dad? WHAT? Couldn’t handle the fact that your prized possession was gone? Couldn’t handle that a son of yours made a shit poor decision and fucked up the entire family? Couldn’t reconcile that the wrong kid died?” I’m yelling now, and tears are pouring down my cheeks. I feel like I might throw up.

“Do NOT talk about your brother that way!” my dad’s voice booms. He winds back and throws the glass at the wall. I watch it shatter into a million pieces as the liquid drips down the wall.

I rarely, maybe fewer times than the number of fingers I have on one hand, remember my dad losing it and yelling like this. I’m getting to him, and I’m okay with that. I stand in place, staring him down. He scrubs a hand down his face and takes a shaky breath.

“It was hard, Darian.” His voice is softer now. Almost resigned. “I had to bury a child. I lost my firstborn son. I had to live with the fact that I didn’t raise him so that he would make better decisions and the fact that I didn’t even know he was doing anything like that! I was so involved in work that I missed that he was making such terrible choices. And then you . . . you fell down that trap, too, Darian. And we didn’t see it. I *lost* my *son*. I pray that you never have to deal with that.”

Not that I expected much, but his words don’t offer me any comfort right now. In fact, they just make me hurt more. Since Nate died, he hasn’t said a single thing to make me feel like I matter to him at all. He hasn’t even tried to understand how much *I* was bleeding out when I lost Nate and then them. How my heart was practically hemorrhaging.

He can’t seem to find the right words tonight. Or ever. At least, not since Nate died.

“Yeah, Dad. I pray I never have to deal with losing a child like you and Mom did. But I can promise you that if I had another child when that happened, I would do *everything* in my power not to lose them, too.”

My father reacts as if I just slapped him. We stare one another down until I feel like I can’t breathe. Then I storm past him and up the stairs, and I slam my door shut with a dramatic flair. I hear him curse and another thud, like he kicked or pushed the chair over. He doesn’t come to knock or try to have any other conversation with me.

I’m angry and hurt, and I just want to shut out the world. The ache in my heart makes it hard to breathe. I take a few deep breaths, trying to calm my nerves, and I realize I’m shaking. After I give myself some time to catch my breath and regulate my body, I go to the bathroom and splash some water on my face. Then I quickly return to my room and flick the lock on my door so I don’t have to address my dad anymore.

I’m still trying not to vomit. Every time we have these conversations, or even when I mention Nate’s name, my parents just can’t seem to understand that a huge part of me died with Nate.

I pull a joint out of the tin can in my bedside table and light up, inhaling a big, deep intake of smoke. I lie down on my bed, hands still shaking, and take another hit. Then I turn on some music, strip to my boxers, and pull the covers up over me. After one more hit, I snuff out the joint.

I roll over as a single tear slides down the side of my face again, and then the floodgates open and I curl into myself, sobbing.

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Chapter 37

Levon

I spend the first twenty minutes of my morning at the shop getting all the invoices and work orders organized while I enjoy my coffee. As I'm finishing and stacking things in piles, I hear voices in the front of the building. I know we're technically open, but it's rare that we have customers this early in the morning during this season. In the summer, I would expect it, but not now. So I head back up front to see what's going on and make sure Uncle John doesn't need anything.

As I round the corner and look up, my heart stops at the sight of Darian Archer standing in my shop. That messy mop of black hair and those perfect, pink lips with that sinful lip ring attached have my senses captivated. I shouldn't be this affected, he's been in the shop before, just last week. But maybe it's the fact that he's a little bit more mine now than he was then.

Those emerald-green eyes turn to look at me as I make my way toward Dare and John. Dare gives me a half smile and holds up a carrying tray of

coffee and a white pastry bag. John chuckles and takes the coffee out of Dare's hands, thanking him and taking one.

"Double the caffeine today! It's my lucky day," Uncle John says, setting this new coffee down beside the one I brought him earlier this morning. It's probably cold now, so this is a welcome delivery.

"Hey. Wha—what're you doing here?" I ask, looking Dare up and down. He's wearing a pair of tight black jeans, no rips today, with black checkered Vans and a T-shirt under a black, torn sweatshirt. He looks like a perfect disheveled mess, and my dick twitches at the sight of him.

He gives me one of his smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. Something is wrong.

He clears his throat. "Hey yourself." He smirks a little bigger. "I, um . . . I was hoping you were here." He bites his bottom lip, folding his empty hand into his pocket and rocking on his toes. John seems to try to busy himself so he doesn't look like he's listening to our conversation. "I wanted to see you."

I'm trying to make sense of what's happening and maybe what Dare is trying to tell me, but I eventually come to my senses and realize we should head to my office.

"Yeah, great," I say. "Let's go sit and see what you brought in that bag."

Dare and I walk back to the office, and I shut the door behind us. I sit on the chair behind my desk and assume that Dare will sit in the single chair in front of it. I don't like this layout right now because it's blocking us from each other, but the breakroom is too open until I know what's going on.

He doesn't sit, though, and when I take a longer and better look at him, I notice that he's almost swaying on his feet. His eyes are bloodshot and swollen, and I'd normally think that was from too much drinking, but not this time. There's something else. Something that isn't just alcohol or pot or god knows what. It's sadness and exhaustion.

My heart seizes with a sudden urge to protect and comfort him. Before I realize what I'm doing, I get up and walk around to the other side of my desk, my body warming as I close in on him. Remembering what he said about sometimes just needing touch, I open my arms and whisper, "Come here."

Dare sighs and falls into me, his arms wrapping around my waist as I encircle his shoulders with a tight hug. I kiss the side of his head and inhale his smokey, earthy, evergreen scent.

We stand like this for a while, hugging, swaying gently, my lips occasionally pressing small kisses to his head, his temple, the top of his head again. I gently rub my hand up and down his back, keeping the other one anchored on his shoulder. His head is nestled into the crook of my shoulder, and he melts into me, pulling me tighter. I can't seem to let him go, so I just keep rubbing his back, breathing in time with him.

Eventually he starts to pull away, but I shake my head slightly and hold him even tighter. I'm not ready to let him go yet. I feel like I'm trying to absorb his pain so he doesn't have to carry it. I'll gladly take it all. I gently rock him side to side, placing more of those same small, soft kisses to the side and back of his head.

He sighs. "Thank you."

I feel his breath on my lips, and it makes me shudder. I need to kiss him. The urge is so strong.

More than that, though, I want to keep giving him the warmth and comfort he needs. I slightly loosen my grip on him, and he pulls back, looking up at me. His eyes plead with me, and I know he wants a kiss too. I slowly lean down, and our lips brush in a soft wisp. When I pull back this time, he still looks exhausted, but I can see the need in his eyes.

He leans in again, and this time it's less gentle. Our lips meet and instantly tangle with one another. I get just a hint of a taste of him, but it's not enough. I want so much more.

I swipe the tip of my tongue over his bottom lip, stopping at his tongue ring. He opens for me immediately, and my tongue plunges into his mouth. Dare lets out the softest noise, something like a half sigh, half whimper, and my cock responds to the sound, hardening insistently. I press my hips gently into him, and he meets me back, his dick equally hard. I dive deeper into his mouth, our tongues sparring and lapping at each other.

When my chest is burning with the need for air, I reluctantly pull away. Then I lead him with me as I move around to my desk chair, sit, and tug him toward me.

"Sit," I tell him.

He does so willingly. His legs hang over the side of the chair, and his ass is almost between my legs, sideways. He keeps one of his arms wrapped around my neck, and the other is on my forearm, which is anchoring him to the chair.

Pulling my lips from his once more, I say, “Now”—*kiss*—“tell me”—*kiss*—“what you’re doing”—*kiss*—“here.” I pepper his cheeks and temple and the side of his eye with kisses, feeling his lashes tickle my upper lip. I hold him a little more closely, this overwhelming urge to keep him warm and safe still flooding my bones.

He sighs and waits a moment as I rub his back. I can tell he’s working to gather his thoughts.

“Couldn’t sleep last night,” he tells me quietly.

I wait for him to go on, but he hesitates, silence filling the room. After another moment, I kiss his cheek again and press my hand into his back to anchor him.

“What happened? What’s bothering you?” I ask. But he doesn’t say anything, and I know he’s going to need a little more coaxing. My hand moves up and down his back. “You can tell me, Dare. I’m here.”

He tenses and nods. Then, finally, he says, “When I got home from Ryan’s, my dad was there. He wanted to talk, but—ah, fuck, Lev, it was a mess. I can’t—” He clings to me for a minute, his body trembling, and I hold him, planting more soft kisses on his neck and cheek as he starts talking quietly. He tells me about what’s happened with his parents since I left. I stop kissing him and just hold him, listening. I’m horrified that they could just discard him as they have. I’d heard things from people—my parents, Lindsey, the guys from the Wolf Pack every now and then, but I didn’t know it was this bad. They’ve all but abandoned him.

A mix of anger and sadness fills me from my toes to the top of my head, and I have to consciously calm myself before I respond. Carefully, and with a deep breath, I say, “Hey,” and I turn his face toward me and gently brush my lips against his. “I’m here. It’s okay.”

Dare takes a deep breath and rests his head back on my shoulder. “After Nate died, everything changed, Lev. My mom isn’t even the same person.” He brushes his hair away from his eyes and continues. “I mean, I was like fifteen by the time everything sort of settled, and I was forced to fend for myself. I was basically living alone and going to school and just . . . existing.”

My heart aches for him. His voice holds so much pain. He shifts a little, pushing himself closer to my center. I pull him in tighter. There isn’t space between us now, and he goes silent.

I hold him, nuzzling into his hair and kissing the sensitive skin behind his ear. I catch his earlobe between my teeth and suck. Dare shivers and lets out a little moan, leaning into my jaw. We sit in silence for a while, me giving him soft, tender kisses and stroking his arm and back.

I can tell this is big, this moment for us. Dare was upset, and he came to me. He knew that whatever he needed, I could give to him. My heart warms at that thought. He's sharing more with me than he has in the past.

I'd better not mess it up.

I pull him in again as he starts talking and tells me about what happened recently. About how his mom said they want to sell the house and how his dad started in on that too.

"Obviously you don't want to do that?" I ask.

I know he's lived there since he was born, and I'm sure the house has a lot of memories for him, but I also know that some people (myself included) struggle with those memories and find it tough to be in that house. Memories of Nate are everywhere there, and yet he's not anywhere. I know that I'd see reminders of him every place I looked. Dare must get a different feel from the house. Maybe he finds comfort in it?

Dare continues. "I don't want to leave it. I like being there, and there are so many memories around it for me. I'm comfortable there, and aside from where the accident happened, it's the only place I feel close to him. I like that."

I kiss him lightly. "I can understand that," I say quietly when we pull away.

"I'd love to have it. Just not sure I could spin that to them." He stops and looks at me, as if something dawns on him. "Is that why you haven't been over yet? Other than to drop off that food the one day?" His arm is gripping my neck as he leans back in the seat to look me in the eye. "Is it too hard for you to come to the house, Lev?" His voice is half teasing and half sympathetic. I just nod. "Well, fuck me . . ." he says, and I chuckle, dirty thoughts running around in my head. "It's okay—I get it. I'm fine coming to you."

"It's not that I can't . . . or that I won't, especially if it's important to you. Right now, I just don't know what it would feel like to be there, and I worry it would be too much."

Dare seems to understand what I'm saying. He kisses me again and leans in, settling his cheek on my shoulder, and I just hold him for a while. Every

now and then, he lets out these adorable and sexy little sighs of contentment, and I never want this moment to end.

Unfortunately, my legs start to fall asleep after a bit longer, and I tap his hip. He sits up and starts to crawl off of me and the chair. He extends his hand and I take it, allowing him to pull me up.

I drape my arms over his shoulders and say, “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you go to my place and take a shower. You can hang out there, try to take a nap. I’ll finish work here and come to you. I’ll bring dinner, and we can watch a movie or something.”

His eyes flutter, and he leans in to give me a soft, sultry kiss. My knees go weak. This guy is going to kill me.

“Are you sure?” he whispers, leaning in to kiss me once more.

I pull away and lick my lips, tasting his kiss. “Positive.” I drop my arms from him, grab my keys, and take the house key off the ring to hand it to him. “Just throw it under the mat once you get in the apartment. That way if you’re sleeping, I can let myself in and not wake you.”

“You know,” he says, wrapping his arms around my neck, “the last time I had a really good night’s sleep was at your house, in your bed.”

I smirk. “Yeah?” My hands naturally find his hips, and I kiss him. “Then go.” I can’t help the way my whole body warms at the fact that Dare is going home to *my* place, and he’s going to be in *my* bed. But what’s bigger is that he *wants* to.

He nods, and his expression seems to lighten. “You’re too good,” he says. Then he looks me up and down. “I need to ruin you.”

My head throws back in a boisterous laugh as he turns around and basically sashays out of the office. His impeccable ass is swaying, and my mouth is watering.

I’m in so much trouble.

I give myself a few minutes to calm down before I head back out to the shop. There’s no way I’m getting any more paperwork done today, not with the thought of Dare at my place, in my shower and then in my bed. I figure working on one of the bikes will be a big enough distraction for me, so I put my coveralls on and meet John at the workstations. He gives me a sly smile as I gather my tools and look at the next ticket.

“Is that a new friend?” he asks, a smirk making the crinkles in his eyes deepen.

I smile. I’m not really sure how to answer that, and I tell him so. “He’s a little more than a friend? Not sure. He’s . . . something?”

Uncle John laughs. “He looks like he’s something, alright.”

I’m smiling like a goof and can’t stop. “It’s really, really new,” I tell him, not quite ready to say anything more than that out loud.

“Well, not that it’s my business, but you lit up when you saw him.”

I laugh. “Okay, old man,” I retort.

He rolls his eyes. “Have fun, Lev. Just have some fun.”

I nod again, and then, stealing my courage, I take the plunge. “Thank you. I like him. And . . . I think he may feel something like that too?”

John just gives me a smile and nod, and we settle into a quiet rest of the afternoon, working on the bikes, helping each other when needed, and letting our hands do the work that we both love.

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Chapter 38

Darian

I leave Lev's shop and feel a mix of exhaustion and exhilaration. He wants me to be at his apartment when he gets home. He told me that he wants me in his place, in his space when he gets home. In his bed, if I'm not mistaken.

That I can absolutely make happen.

When I leave his shop, I drive right to his apartment and let myself in with the key he gave me. It's warm inside, but not too warm, and it smells like him. Fresh laundry, sandalwood, and just . . . clean. I put the key under the mat and lock the door.

I walk farther into the apartment, grabbing a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. Then I take a minute and look around, trying to get more of a feel for him and what he's into. Yes, I've been here before, but it was always under different circumstances, and I haven't had time to really look around. It feels like I'm in Lev's presence. His scent and the warmth of the place reminds me of being wrapped up in his arms not more than a half

hour ago. It's like he's here, even though he's not. I wonder if I can get him to be this comfortable at my house in the future.

I look around for a few more minutes, noting the large TV hanging on the wall in the living room, across from his comfy-looking couch. He's also got a bookshelf filled mostly with magazines about mechanic stuff and a few classic novels. One of the shelves has about fifteen little model motorcycles, all varying types and sizes, and then there's a picture of his family that was taken at graduation, Lindsey in her cap and gown. Everything is so tidy and clean, which makes me chuckle because it's so inherently Lev.

Finally, I make my way into Lev's bedroom. I've been here enough that it's a more familiar space, comfortable in a way that has my nervous system starting to settle down. With a few deep breaths, I do just as Lev asked and take a nice, hot shower, paying extra attention to certain areas of my body. When I'm done, I don't bother putting clothes back on because, well, I know what I want to happen tonight, and being naked in his bed when he gets home will send the message loud and clear. I dry my hair with the towel and then drape it over the hamper before heading back into the bedroom and crawling under the covers.

Lev's bed smells so good, and it's so comfortable. I think if I just rest my eyes for a few minutes, I can be up and awake when he gets home.

Jingling and rustling noises wake me sometime later. I roll over, blinking my eyes and trying to orient myself. I hear the noise again, dishes clanking and ice falling into glasses. I try to take in my surroundings and remember that I'm in Lev's room, in Lev's bed. Rolling over, I reach for the lamp on the bedside table and turn it on. It casts a soft glow into the room. Then I sit and prop myself up on a few pillows. I hear more sounds from the kitchen, so I yell out, "Heeyy." My voice is groggy and thick from my nap.

Lev comes to the doorway, filling it and looking like a snack. The man is absolutely gorgeous. He leans his shoulder against the doorframe.

"Hey yourself. Did you sleep?" He comes into the room and leans down, giving me a soft, sweet kiss. I nod. He smiles, and his dimple deepens in his cheek. He's so hot. "Good." He kisses me softly again and stands up.

"What time is it?" I ask, running my hand through my hair.

He takes his shoes off and pulls his T-shirt over his head, revealing that broad, tattooed chest. Just a small smattering of chest hair covers him, and right under his belly button is that delicious line of hair that disappears

under his jeans. He knows exactly what he's doing right now, and it's working.

"About five thirty," he says as he turns around and grabs a pair of sweatpants out of his drawer. "I got dinner if you're hungry." He turns his head back to look at me over his shoulder and wiggles his brows. I can't help but laugh. "I'm going to shower quickly, and then we can eat. Or cuddle. Or . . . whatever." He disappears into the bathroom, and I hear the water in the shower turn on.

Aaaannddd my dick is hard.

A few minutes later, Lev comes out of the steamy bathroom, sweats on and the towel draped around his neck and shoulders. He's still a little dewy from the shower and hot steam, and he looks like a dream. I lick my lips and swallow hard.

"Sooooo, dinner?" he asks, heading out toward the kitchen. He has no idea that I'm naked in his bed. My heart rate picks up as I picture his reaction to what I'm about to do.

Boldly, I throw the covers off and pad out to the kitchen. Lev has his back turned to me, and he's opening up a pizza box that's sitting on the counter. He reaches up to get two plates from the cabinet and turns to me as he sets them on the counter.

"I hope tha—" His eyes go wide, and he faces me fully. "You're naked," he says, his voice sultry and his sexy Adam's apple moving up and down as he swallows hard.

He stalks over to me, and my body lights the fuck up. Goose bumps erupt from head to toe as he reaches me and wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me in for a deep, hot kiss. His hands roam down my back and grab both of my butt cheeks, squeezing and pulling my midsection into his.

It's safe to say that he likes what he sees. His lengthening cock confirms it for me.

He pulls away from my body just briefly. "Jesus, lycan. This is nice to come home to." He kisses me again, his grip almost bruising on my rear, and I love it.

He starts to walk me backwards, his groin and abdomen gently pushing me while his hands stay on my ass.

"But," I say as I pull my lips from his, a teasing smile on my face, "what about dinner?"

He keeps moving us toward the bedroom.

“Dinner can wait,” he growls, diving into my mouth, his tongue licking every corner he can get into.

I meet him stroke for stroke, my hands gripping his sides. He pushes me onto the bed and climbs over me. My legs instinctively wrap around his waist, and my hips lift off of the bed. Lev groans and thrusts his hips into me. I gasp. My dick is at full mast, and I can feel his grinding against me, the layer of his sweatpants between us creating a delicious friction. We dry hump until my dick is weeping and precum is all over my stomach and leaving wet marks on his sweatpants. Lev breaks his body away from me for a split second to drop his sweatpants, and then he’s back over me, sucking on my neck, kissing my jaw, nipping and tugging on my lip ring. Each of these things elicits little sounds out of me that I can’t control.

Lev’s abs stroke my dick as he rocks into me, his dick facing down, rubbing up and down on my balls and taint. I desperately buck up into him, chasing the tingle that’s charging down my spine.

“Oh god, Lev. I’m close. I’m so close.”

He reaches his hand under my leg and grabs one of my ass cheeks, his fingers brushing my tight hole, and I. Am. Done. My cock explodes between us, shooting stream after stream of cum on my chest and stomach, covering Lev’s abs and chest as well.

He pushes a few more times and stands up, grabbing his cock and stroking. “I’m gonna come. Can I come on you?” he says quickly.

I nod, and he almost immediately lets go all over my stomach, mixing with the mess I just made. He groans, his head thrown back as he paints my stomach.

“Jesus Christ, lycan.”

He leans down and kisses me, mixing our releases together on our stomachs. I smile at him and chase his kiss as he goes to stand up. Then I swipe my fingers through our cum and stare him down as I slide two of my fingers into my mouth and taste us both.

“Fuuuucckkkk,” Lev whispers. “That’s so fucking hot.” His eyes are wide, pupils blown. He leans in and kisses me again, tasting.

“Mmmmm,” I groan.

I stand up with him and then take my turn walking us backwards, my lips not leaving his. We make it to the bathroom, and Lev lets go long enough to turn the water on in the shower. When the water’s hot, we get in and clean

off together. Once we're both done and dry, he hands me a pair of his sweatpants and puts his back on.

I notice a wet spot on his and smirk.

"Nice," I tease.

He glances down. "Shit." With a laugh, he heads back over to the dresser and puts on another pair. "Now," he says, grabbing my hand, "let's eat."

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The pizza is lukewarm when we make it back out to the kitchen, but that's a price we are both willing to pay for what just happened in Lev's bed. We put a few slices on our plates and go into the living room to eat and watch TV. Lev sits on one end of the couch, and I sit cross-legged on the other end, facing him. We eat and talk, laughing and sharing stories about things that have happened since we've been apart. The mood is light and airy, and we're both doing our best to leave the past in the past for right now so we can just enjoy this moment, together. A few times, I find myself pausing, an odd feeling in my gut that wars with the settled feeling in my heart. But I push it away in favor of keeping the mood positive.

When the conversation lulls and silence fills the room, Lev puts his plate on the coffee table and clears his throat. "So," he starts. My stomach flip-flops. "So the guys were talking about the bonfire the other night."

He pats the space beside him, inviting me closer to join him. He's getting it, my need for touch and connection. I smile and slide over even closer to him. He puts his arm around me, and I lean into his side as he continues.

"Have you thought about—do you—is that something you would want to go to?"

I want to laugh at how silly I was to think that he was going to say something serious or upsetting.

"Ryan actually said something about it the other night too. We'll be there. I love the bonfire. Always have."

He gives my shoulder a squeeze. "Good. My whole family is going to go, but of course my parents will leave when the adults do, and of course Lindsey and her friends will be there. I'd love it if you'd come with me."

I pull back from Lev's chest and look up at him. "Levon Richardson, are you asking me on a date?"

Lev's cheeks and the tips of his ears turn a bright shade of pink. He smiles, and that goddamn dimple gets me right in the gut. I can't help reaching out and putting my pointer finger in it.

He laughs. "I guess I am."

"I'd love to," I say, giving him a kiss on the cheek over the dimple that I just poked. "But . . . I told Ryan I would go with him, so if that's okay, I'll meet you there?"

"It's a date." He laughs and pulls me back to him. I shift to lie down so my head is in Lev's lap, and he settles into the couch more deeply, letting his fingers thread through my hair. A comfortable sigh escapes my mouth, though my gut is still churning with anticipation and my heart is still warm. It's the weirdest combination.

We watch the rest of whatever movie is on, then get ready to go to bed. Rather than sleep right away, we tangle ourselves together and make out for a while. We eventually settle in, our bodies against one another, my brain busy trying to process what's happening.

I'm going on a date—an official date—with Lev. This man that I've had a crush on since I was a teenager. I'm currently in his bed, I had dinner with him, I just made out with him, and he's holding me. This in itself seems like a date. But I'm going on an official date with him in a few days. This is all a dream come true for me.

But he was my brother's best friend. Is it fair that we have each other when neither of us can have Nate? There's a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach again, and my heart suddenly doesn't feel warm and whole like it has all night. I've been ignoring this problem for a while, pretending it would just disappear, maybe. But here it is again.

"You're thinking really loudly," Lev says, as though he senses my tension. He kisses the top of my head. "What's wrong?"

Neither of us move, but my eyes are open, staring into the dark.

"Nothing," I say on a sigh. "I'm just . . . I think this is wild. I never thought I'd be in this situation."

He kisses my head again, pulling me closer to him. "What situation?" he whispers.

"This. Lev, I used to pretend this was real when we were young. I wanted this so badly. I wanted *you* so badly. But come on. You were Nate's best friend. You guys had the Pack, and you seemed so much older than I was. But you were so *nice* to me, and I thought you were so hot, even back

then.” Lev chuckles into my hair, his breath warm. “I know, it sounds ridiculous,” I continue. “But it also seems to be too good right now, and I don’t know if I . . . if we . . . ” I trail off, not wanting to say what I’m thinking.

He kisses my head again, stroking his hand over my stomach. “We’re seeing what this is, Dare. We don’t have to label it right now. I like you. You like me. You’re in my bed, aren’t you? We’re not kids anymore. Let’s just see where it goes, okay? I like this . . . a lot.”

I release the breath that I was holding and close my eyes. I’m glad that it’s dark and he can’t see my face.

“Okay,” I say, letting him believe that all of my tension is because I’m nervous about us. But that’s the thing—I’m sure about *this*. I’m not nervous about seeing where this goes. Things have moved forward so well and perfectly with Lev so far, heading in the direction of a committed relationship, even though it’s only been a few short weeks since we ran into each other at the Exchange. Now we’re headed toward being boyfriends. *This*—this thing that we have—I’m so sure about it. It feels so good, almost perfect.

But what I’m not sure about is why I deserve it. Why should I have Lev, and why should he have me, when Nate can’t have either of us and we can’t have Nate?

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Chapter 39

Darian

I have to admit that getting ready for the bonfire, I have butterflies in my stomach. Not only because I'm going with Lev, but because it's the first real date I've been on in a few years. I'm not someone who traditionally dates. I'm more of a hook-up person. But tonight, I'm going on a date with Lev Richardson. I've only ever dreamed about this happening. I never thought that it would, but here we are. And *he* asked *me* out.

I take a deep breath and start to get dressed in what I'd normally wear to go out with friends. I don't really do Halloween per se. I mean, I love the holiday and the decorations and the candy, but I don't dress up. I do take a few minutes to embellish my look with some black nail polish, jewelry, and this sexy leather and chain harness that straps to my thigh, but that's the extent of my "costume" for the night.

Exactly when he said he would be here, Ryan honks his horn to let me know he's outside. I grab my wallet and phone just as a text comes through from him telling me to get my ass outside. My maroon beanie is by my bedroom door, so I grab it and put it on my head, then take one more glance

at myself in the bathroom mirror before bounding down the stairs to meet Ryan and Katie in the driveway.

I climb in the back of the car, greeting both of them, and I throw my head back as I laugh. They are ridiculous. Ryan is dressed as Buddy the Elf, and Katie is dressed as Jovie. It's our favorite Christmas movie. I can't stop laughing as I settle in the back seat.

"Shut up, asshole," Ryan says. "You're lucky we didn't make you get in on this."

He has a smirk on his face, so I know he's secretly loving it. Katie can't stop giggling, and it's contagious. By the time we get to the lake, my cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

The smoke from the bonfire is easily spotted, billowing upward from the edge of the lake. Everyone is talking, and music is playing from the dock. My eyes search the grounds, and I look for Lev, twisting the skull ring on my finger.

It takes a moment before I spot him across the park, sitting in a circle with the guys from the Wolf Pack. He sees me at the same time, and our eyes lock. My stomach flips in a weird mix of joy and guilt. Lev stands and says something to his friends before he turns and heads toward me. My heart is racing, and my palms are sweaty. He gives me a smile, and that dimple makes my knees weak.

"Hey," I say, breathing out and giving him a smile back.

He steps toward me. "Hey yourself." As he leans in and presses a kiss to my cheek, he whispers, "You look amazing, little lycan."

Goose bumps erupt down my neck as his breath meets my ear. I kiss his cheek back, and we pull away. I look him up and down and realize who he's dressed up as.

Squeezing his arm, I say, "Hottie lumberjack." I give him a wink and wiggle my eyebrows at him.

He blushes and then slides his hand down my arm and links his fingers through mine. I can't breathe.

"Is this okay?" he asks quietly, squeezing my hand.

I swallow hard and give him a nod. "Ye-yeah. It's fine. If—if you're okay with it."

Lev squeezes my hand again and smiles.

The sweet tension of the moment is officially broken, however, when Ryan says "Awwww, look how cute you are!" in a sing-song voice,

bumping his front into my back.

I stumble forward a little bit. “Shut up,” I seethe, blushing.

Lev laughs and lets go of my hand to greet Katie and Ryan, a huge smile crossing his lips. “Your costumes are freaking awesome. I love it. Hey, you guys are welcome to come sit over there in our circle if you want.”

“Hey, thanks, man,” Ryan replies, putting his arm around Katie’s waist. “We’re going to go find some of our friends first, though, if that’s okay.”

“Of course, yeah.” Lev turns to me. “Did you want to go with them instead?”

“No way!” I exclaim. “*We* are on a date!”

He smiles so wide that the skin around his eyes crinkles. I’m making this date as real as I can, and it’s worth it because Lev’s smile blinds me. God, that dimple.

Ryan and Katie wave goodbye, and Lev takes my hand again and leads me over to the Wolf Pack. Everyone stands up and shakes my hand, each one of them dropping their eyes to where Lev and I are holding hands.

Chris smirks and gently taps his wife, and Nolan looks at our hands and then at Lev saying, “Nothing, huh?” It’s said in jest, and Lev just shoots him a glare. Caleb pats my shoulder and tells me he’s happy for me. And then there’s Garrett, who barely gets up to say anything. He just tips his beer to me. I nod back.

“Do you want to go get some food?” Lev asks.

I’m really freaking hungry, so I agree, and he guides us toward the grills. I hear the guys in the circle whistling and howling as we walk away. Lev shakes his head and squeezes my hand. Then, he lets me go so we can make up our plates.

God, this whole thing is surreal. It’s a date. A date with an amazing guy who happens to have been my brother’s best friend.

I look around at all of the families and kids, all the people I went to high school with, and memories rush back. I’ve been coming to the bonfire ever since I was a kid, and even after Nate died, I still came every year. It was always important, maybe because Nate loved it so much.

Yet, for some reason, this year, it’s hitting differently. Not bad by any means. Just . . . different. And maybe that’s because I have Lev here.

I’m brought back to reality again when Lev softly asks, “Are you okay?”

I shake my head to clear my thoughts and then smile at him. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” I build my plate with a burger and some sides and then grab a

drink, greeting and nodding at people as I work my way down the line.

While I'm getting my food, the familiar—and dreaded—thing happens. Some of the people around us give me a friendly greeting, smiling and telling me they're glad to see me. Other people hide behind their sad faces, giving me an almost pathetic look and pointedly avoiding saying anything to me. One of the older ladies takes my forearm above my leather cuff bracelet and looks me in the eye. "How are you doing, sweetheart?" she asks.

I smile and tell her I'm good. I try not to sound annoyed.

She smiles warmly and walks away. It's the same everywhere I go.

I take a deep breath and look up to see that Ryan and Katie found a group of friends from high school. I give them a nod. Jenna's there with them, and she waves at me. I smile back at her. Ryan winks and blows me a kiss. He's such an ass.

Once both of our plates are full, Lev leads me back to the Wolf Pack. When we get there, there's only enough seating for all of them and one of us, so Lev sits and pats his thigh.

"I can't sit on your lap," I say, shaking my head.

"Why not?" he asks.

I don't have a strong argument. People have all seen us holding hands, so why not? I take a deep breath and sit down on his thigh, and Lev almost immediately leans into me and whispers quietly into my ear.

"You look so fucking sexy tonight, lycan. The leather and the bracelet and *this*." His eyes move down to the harness on my thigh. The leather straps wrap around my upper thigh and are connected with silver rings. Lev grabs one of the leather straps and tugs lightly. "Is that for me?" he asks playfully.

I smirk at him. "Nope. It's for me." I wiggle my eyebrows, and he lets out a growly sigh that has me melting.

We eat and join in the conversation with his friends, and eventually, it's flowing so smoothly that I don't even realize I've put my plate down and Lev's hand is on the side of my thigh, his thumb hooked through the ring on the harness. It feels so good that it makes me shiver. I do catch Chris and Nolan looking, but they just glance away when they see me notice and then keep talking.

After we eat and the young kids and some families start to leave, I turn to Lev. "Do you mind if we go hang out with Ryan and Katie and those guys

for a while?” I ask.

He smiles, removing his hand from my thigh. “Yeah, let’s go for a little. That’s cool.”

I lean over, giving him a chaste kiss. “Thank you, date,” I say, smiling. “Come with me.”

I get up from his lap, and he links our fingers together as we walk to the group of my friends. Once we get settled in an empty seat, Lindsey comes over to us with two chairs and hangs for a little, introducing her new boyfriend to us. He seems like a really nice guy.

The air is cool, and the festivities are picking up. Lev and Lindsey go to the food tables to get a few snacks, and I stay in the group, talking to a few guys I haven’t seen for a while. I sigh as I see Lance walking across the lawn to our group. He sits down beside me in one of the empty chairs and gives me a sly and almost dirty grin.

“You’re looking fucking hot tonight, Dare.” He reaches over and rubs his fingers up my arm.

I still, meeting his eyes. “Thank you, and you can stop touching me now.” I move my arm away from him and shift in my seat.

“Aww, come on. I miss you,” he says, leaning closer.

Lance’s breath is warm on my cheek and smells an awful lot like alcohol. There’s a searing burn on my other cheek. My head snaps to the side, and I find Lev, holding a few bags of single-serve chips and pretzels, his eyes locked on the two of us as he tries to hold a conversation with one of the older men cleaning up. I know he wants nothing more than to get back to our group.

I smile at him to let him know I’m okay and turn back to Lance. “I’m sorry, Lance. Why are you being like this? You know whatever was between us is done now. I’m sorry if I didn’t make that clear.”

Ryan shifts in the seat beside me.

Lance scoffs. “Acting like what?”

I can tell he’s been drinking, and he’s really not acting like he normally does. My stomach tumbles.

“Please, Dare. Spare me. We’re done so you can be with the bulky motorcycle dude?” he says, his tone mocking and his speech slurred. “Isn’t he like, your brother’s best friend or something? That’s quite incestual, don’t you think?”

I’m up and out of my chair as quickly as Ryan is, and he instantly gets in between the two of us. I hear Lev yell “Hey!” as he storms over to the group, dropping the chips in the chair beside me. I really, really don’t want a scene, but people are already gawking, and so I guess that’s too much to ask. Ryan has his back to me, one hand behind him on my stomach and his other hand on Lance’s chest. Lev is suddenly there, too, stepping up behind me, his body heat seeping into my back.

I work to control my breathing as I hold Lance’s gaze over Ryan’s shoulder. Lance was always such a nice guy when we were hooking up. I’m a little surprised by his reaction to me now and to Lev when he saw him at the bar a few days ago. Maybe our hookups meant more to him than I thought. Yikes. Maybe I'll deal with him and that another time. Right now, I need to diffuse the current situation.

“I’m good. It’s good,” I say, and I try to step back from Ryan, but the wall of man behind me keeps me from moving away. “I’m fine. I—we’re fine. I’m sorry Lance. I’m just—”

“He’s with me,” Lev growls, wrapping his arm around my waist. I swallow hard. This possessive side of Lev is a fucking turn-on. And the way he’s touching me is sending me into orbit. I never thought I would be into the possessive, growly type, but with Lev being like this? It’s fucking awesome.

I lean back into Lev and look at Lance again, trying not to show how giddy I’m feeling. But my next words come out with a strong conviction. “I’m seeing Lev now, and I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

Lance replies with only a short “whatever” and walks away from our group. Ryan turns.

“W-T-F was that?” he asks in pure Ryan fashion.

I snort. “Bug up his butt, I guess.” I can’t really think clearly now that Lev is holding me like he is. Between what just happened and this, I’m a little dizzy. I press my backside against his front, and he growls in my ear.

I like growly Lev. I like him a lot.

I wiggle a slight wiggle, so discreet that no one but Lev will know.

Lev’s breath warms my ear. “You better knock it off, lycan. I can’t be walking around this party with a hard-on.” He nips the lobe of my ear, sucking on the stud pierced through it. I tilt my head back against him and exhale quietly.

“Okay, gross, you two,” Ryan shouts, and my face heats up as I remember that we’re in front of a bunch of people. Oops.

We pull apart, and after a moment to breathe and settle, Lev injects himself into the group. Lindsey must have come back when everything was happening, and her eyes are wide as they dart between Lev and me. She gives me a warm smile and shakes her head at her brother.

It’s a little weird, honestly, being here with Lev and my friends. It’s okay, just new and different from what I’m used to.

It’s starting to get dark now, the beautiful fall yellow of the evening sky disappearing into the horizon, and the fire is burning brightly. We all grab chairs and find places in a circle next to the fire.

It’s time for the big kids to play now.

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Chapter 40

Levon

My group of friends has joined us now, and we're all sitting by the fire, forming a big circle. Dare pulls a beer out of a cooler that I guess Ryan and Katie brought. My cooler is in my car, so I tell Chris and Garrett that we'll be back and lean into Dare.

"I have to go to the car. Come with me?" I ask.

He stands without hesitation, and we walk across the park to the lot where my car is parked. It's slightly darker there, and there aren't as many people around since most of the families with younger kids have left. I'm just hyped up enough to take full advantage of that.

I pull Dare around to the other side of the car where we're hidden a little more. There's just enough light for me to see his face. Pushing him against the car, I drop my hands to find his hips and press my body into his. His eyes go large, but he smiles and wraps his arms around my neck. I let go of one side of his waist and flip my hat backwards, then lean in and catch his lips with mine. He lets out a sound that goes right to my groin.

I've needed this since the moment I saw him arrive earlier, but the kiss still feels like it's not enough.

I pull away to take a breath.

"You look so fucking sexy," I tell him, rubbing my thumb gently back and forth over his lip ring. "I fucking love this so much."

He sighs. "More kissing," he whispers and leans forward.

I smile into his lips and lean against him again, our midsections lining up. He slowly grinds into me, using my belt loops to pull me against him, and I match him, rocking my hips with his. I slip my tongue into his mouth and deepen the kiss. It feels like we're consuming each other, and my entire body is on fire.

We eventually break the kiss, and I rest my forehead against Dare's. Our breaths mingle in the small space between us.

"Come home with me tonight," I say, the statement loaded with intent.

Dare closes his eyes and inhales deeply. He pulls me in for a hug and rubs his hands up and down my back. I feel him nod against my neck.

"Okay," he breathes out, and our lips meet again in another passionate kiss. He pulls away shortly after. "We have to stop and go back to the fire or I'm going to come in my pants."

I laugh and kiss his jaw and then his neck. "We don't want that," I say, pulling him away from the car and giving him one more quick kiss. "Save it for me."

I grab the cooler and lock the car again, then take his hand in my empty one and lead us back to the campfire where our friends are all waiting and giving us stupid looks.

"We weren't sure you were coming back," Lindsey says with a wink as we settle into our chairs. She's holding hands with Julian, and I just love seeing how comfortable they look together. I didn't think it was possible, but my heart warms up even more.

The night progresses, the fire burns, and the music eventually shuts off as the DJ packs up. Someone puts some music on from their phone, playing it so everyone can sort of hear over the fire and talking. The lake and its black, ink-like water stretch out beyond the landscape, and a chilly breeze picks up, blowing in off the water. Everyone drinks and talks and laughs, catching up, joking around, and genuinely enjoying one another's company.

I'm talking to Caleb about nothing terribly important, and Dare's off a ways talking with Lindsey and Julian. He's turned his back to me, so I don't

know what they're talking about, but Julian and Dare seem to be in a deep conversation. Lindsey is nodding and smiling at what they're saying, clapping her hands every now and then. It's cool to see everyone just hanging out and getting along.

As the fire starts to get smaller and people start to trickle out, our group breaks up, too. Chris and his wife leave first, followed by Garrett.

"I gotta swing by the bar for a little bit," he tells us.

A few of Dare's friends leave, and then Lindsey and Julian stand up.

"You heading out?" I ask her, standing up and stretching out my back.

"Yeah, we're going to get going. Tonight was fun." She gives me a hug, and I shake Julian's hand. "Let's get together soon. The four of us."

I nod and look at Dare, who's now standing next to me. "That sounds great. I'd love to talk more, man," he says to Julian. They shake hands, and Lindsey hugs Dare.

"We'll walk with you," I say.

After a quick goodbye to Nolan, his fiancée, and Caleb, I wave to Katie and Ryan and watch as they give Dare hugs and high fives. Then Lindsey, Julian, Dare, and I walk to the lot where the cars are. The lot has thinned since Dare and I were here a few hours ago, and only maybe a dozen cars are left now. We say goodbye one more time and peel off in twos to go to our cars. I unlock my car and open the passenger side door for Dare.

Dare grins. "Thank you," he says, starting to slide into the seat. I grab the leather harness on his leg through the main ring and tug, throwing him off balance a little.

"This," I say, my voice coated in lust.

He chuckles, slapping my hand away and sliding the rest of the way into the seat before snapping his seat belt into place. I close his door and walk around to the driver's side. Then I climb in, start up the car, and turn the seat warmers on.

"Lev!" Dare exclaims. "Are you warming up my butt?" He does a little shimmy in his seat.

A boisterous laugh forces itself out of my throat. "Oh my god."

Dare chuckles. "What? It's like pregame to the pregame." He's smiling at me.

"I can't with you," I say, shaking my head. I reach over and put my hand on his thigh, giving it a squeeze. He sighs and drops his hand on top of mine, lacing our fingers together.

We sit in silence for the short drive, and when we pull into the parking lot of my apartment, I feel jittery, my stomach flip-flopping. I feel like a teenager getting ready for my first kiss. But this is so much bigger.

Dare gives me no insight into how he's feeling about everything. Aside from the joke in the car about warming his ass up, we haven't talked about what we're planning to do once we get inside.

He steps through the door ahead of me, and I lock it and toss the keys on the table as we both move farther into the apartment. The air is full of lust, and my heart is racing.

Dare turns to face me, a sexy grin on his face. "Hey," he says airily as I close the space between us.

I slide my hand to his waist, hook my first two fingers in the front waistband of his jeans, and pull him closer. "Hey yourself," I whisper, and I lean in and connect our lips.

Our tongues are immediately seeking each other out as the kiss deepens. He tastes so incredibly good. I know I'm already addicted. I move my hands from the front of his jeans to the sides of his waist, and when our groins touch, a spark shoots down my spine. My dick fills quickly, and it meets his hardening cock as we grind into each other. We kiss until the air is sucked out of the room and we both have to break away to breathe.

Dare's eyes darken. "Take me to bed, Paul Bunyan," he says, tracing my jaw and neck with his lips.

I tilt my head to give him better access, and he sucks and nips at my neck, eliciting some feral sound from me that's somewhere between a growl and a moan. I start walking him backward toward the bedroom but then stop, and his brow cinches together in confusion.

"I want *this*," I say, grabbing the silver ring on his leather harness and pulling. I turn, leading him into the bedroom by the decoration adorning his thigh. It's unbalanced, and he stumbles into me, wrapping his arms around my midsection and laughing. I tug again and toss him onto the bed. It's clumsy and uncoordinated but also sexy as hell, and I'm hard and ready and fucking turned on.

I crawl on top of Dare on my bed, and our lips meet as I grind into him. He's returning the movements, and it's frantic and needy, both of us panting against each other like we can't get enough. His length rubs against mine, and I can barely stand it. I need *more*.

Dare rips his lips from me and pushes me up with both hands on my chest. “Wait, wait,” he says, breathing heavily.

I pause, paranoid that I did something wrong. He sees the concern written all over my face and gives me a quick kiss.

“It’s okay, just let me go to the bathroom first,” he explains.

I sigh and roll off of him, and he gets up. He shuts the door, and I puff out a breath, running my fingers through my hair and down my face. I don’t know what my obsession is with him, but it’s there and undeniable at this point. Tonight was amazing. It was a real date, and there was no weirdness or odd feelings or anything. Dare is so comfortable and easy to be around, and it all feels natural and right. *He* feels right.

The bathroom door opens, and as soon as I see him, it’s like all the air has left my bedroom. My eyes widen, and my mouth moves into a smile that I have absolutely no control over.

Dare is standing there in nothing but that damn hot harness.

The man is buck-ass naked sans the leather wrapping around his upper thigh. He has to hold the two clips in his right hand since he doesn’t have belt buckles to connect it to, but it’s incredible nonetheless. His skin is flushed, and he’s smirking. His cock juts out, thick and long, and I feel like I want to beg him to let me lick it, put my lips on it and take him deep. I want to worship him.

“You are fucking gorgeous, lycan.” My eyes take him in from head to toe, and I didn’t think it was possible, but I feel myself get harder. “God, you’re beautiful,” I tell him as he comes over to the bed.

His cock jumps at my compliment, and I notice a small drip of precum glistening on its tip. A moan involuntarily escapes my throat, and I lick my lips.

“You like?” he asks, swaying his hips as he comes closer. He turns the harness-wrapped leg to me, taunting me.

I push up on one elbow and let my eyes track up and down his body. He’s glorious. Perfect. I’ve seen him before, naked and lying in my bed, but now, standing in front of me, giving me a show . . .

Damn.

My eyes linger on him for a few moments, and he seems to understand that I want to see all of him. He turns around to give me a good look at his ass. My mouth waters as I drink him in. His round cheeks show two dimples at the top, and I can’t wait to push my tongue into them. He pulls

his glutes in, flexing his cheeks, and I reach out, unable to wait any longer, and grab the ring on the harness again, yanking him on top of me.

"Get in this fucking bed," I growl as he lands on me.

He lets go of the harness straps, and it slackens on his thigh. I don't even care because he's on top of me, naked. Our lips meet again, and we kiss like we're starving for one another, and we only have limited time, when in reality we have all night.

Dare pushes up on his hands, sitting on my pelvis. His cock is lying on my shirt.

"Too many clothes," he says, starting to undo the buttons on my flannel. I don't know if it's intentional or not but his hips swivel on my hard dick through my jeans as he sits above me, and I groan and push my head back into the pillows. He makes progress on my buttons, and I anchor a hand on his thigh, remembering how much he likes physical touch. After he's pushed the flannel off my shoulders and my arms are free, I reach back, grab the collar of my T-shirt, and yank it over my head one-handed. I throw it to the side, and my hands immediately find his hips again, guiding him back and forth on my hard bulge.

His hands fall to my bare chest and he grips, his fingers digging into my pecs. A "*yesss*" falls from my lips, and I push up into him. He scoots back a little onto my thighs and grabs the belt and button on my jeans.

"These," he says. "They're blocking what I need. Take them off."

I nod at him to let him know I'm ready for it.

We work my jeans down my legs, and he shifts off of me just long enough to help tug them off, along with my underwear. The moment I'm naked, Dare straddles me again. We are skin to skin, *finally*, and it feels otherworldly. He rubs on my dick, sliding it up and down his crack, and we both moan. Then he falls forward onto me and captures my lips again, kissing, licking, and biting. My arms wrap around his lower back.

I'm so fucking gone already, and all we've done is make out.

He shifts so my dick is trapped between us, and I feel myself leaking as he glides back and forth on it.

"Fuck, Dare." I reach around and grab his ass cheeks, massaging and squeezing as he grinds on me. "Your ass is fantastic. Can I play?"

He slides down my body, kissing and licking as he goes. "Later," he says, and he takes one of my hard nipples into his mouth and swirls his tongue around it, then bites down lightly. I gasp and feel him smile against my

chest as he moves to the other nipple to do the same thing, not allowing his tongue to leave my skin. He continues his way down, trailing along my abs with his tongue. It's wet heat circles my belly button, and I grip the sheets, bucking my hips up.

He moves down farther, and I feel his nose press against the crease of my leg. He inhales. *Did he just sniff me?* I don't have time to think any more about it because seconds later, he licks the tip of my dick, taking my precum onto his tongue, and my brain short-circuits. He glances up at me with a completely sinful look in his eyes and then sinks his mouth down on my rock-hard cock. He takes me in about halfway and then hollows his cheeks and sucks his way back up. His lip ring grazes the underside of my cock, and I gasp.

Dare repeats the motion, plunging down on me and sucking on the way up, and in no time, he's taking me in all the way, swallowing around my tip. He comes up, popping off of me with an audible sound and takes in a deep breath before going right back down.

It feels so incredible. Too incredible.

As he's working me with his mouth, his head bobbing up and down, I start to feel sparks shooting down my spine. I grab his shoulders and tense. "Okay, okay. You have to stop. I don't want to come yet."

He laughs and looks up at me, his eyes hooded and his lips swollen. I pull him up to my mouth, give him a quick kiss and flip him over so I'm hovering above him. I can taste my saltiness on his tongue when our lips connect again and I lap it up. He spreads his legs so I can fit between them, and I continue kissing his face and then his jaw and then his neck. He whimpers and tilts his head, making room for me to kiss and explore more. He smells amazing, and it lights me up. I move my way down his chest, sucking and licking and biting, soothing the spots with my tongue. The noises coming out of Dare are beautiful, and I want to hear more. When I get to his chest, I suck hard on his pec, and he gasps.

"Fuck! Lev!" He grips my shoulders, and I've suddenly got the overwhelming need to mark him, to give him something to remind him of tonight.

I pause, my lips barely brushing his skin. "I want to mark you," I say. "Is that okay?"

"God, yes. Please," he whines.

I don’t need any more encouragement. I suck one more time, a little harder than the first, and his hips jump as he arches his back.

“Ahhhhhhh.” The sound he makes is a mix of pain and ecstasy.

I gently lick and blow on the spot, and he moans quietly.

“Lev,” he pleads.

“I’ve got you,” I soothe. Then I slowly and torturously work my way down his body. I get to his dick and grip the base with my hand, flattening my tongue and licking a strip from the base to the head. I swirl my tongue around the tip and repeat the motion again. He’s moaning and gasping, and I feel like I’m going to explode. I take him in my mouth and give him a few good sucks, and then I lift one of his legs and go lower.

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Chapter 41

Darian

I have to be in a dream. This can't be real. I'm in bed with Lev, completely naked, and he's devouring me. I never thought this would happen with him, but I'm so ready. His body is warm, his mouth is warmer, and he feels more than incredible. The make-out session we're having is so fucking hot I feel like I'm going to explode. Like my body could just ignite right now, and I would burn.

Everything is so overwhelming, especially when Lev moves down my body and starts sucking my dick. God, this man knows what he's doing. He's so caring and attentive and fucking hot as sin. He licks my aching cock and shifts down to my balls, taking one gently into his mouth. My hands fly to his head, and I grip his hair.

"Fuuuckkk Lev. Mmmyygodholyshit." This man is pulling sounds out of me that I've never heard myself make. I should be embarrassed, but he feels so good and is making *me* feel so good that I don't care. He seems to like the sounds, too, so I'm not even trying to restrain myself.

He moves to the other ball and licks gently, then sucks it in and swirls his tongue. He lets it go before lifting my right leg—the one with the harness on it—and holding the slack leather in his hand, using the harness to control where my leg is. Clearly the harness was a good idea.

His tongue slides under my balls and over my taint, and I hear him suck back some of his saliva in one of the most salacious sounds I've ever heard. He looks up at me, biting his bottom lip, and his gorgeous blue eyes are so filled with lust and desire that they're almost black. I love that I'm turning him on as much as he's turning me on.

"Can I?" he asks, alluding to the fact that he's about to eat my ass.

"Oh fuck yes. Please do," I beg.

With one hand, he holds the harness, keeping my leg positioned where he wants it, and with the other hand, he moves my ass cheek out of the way. Then his tongue sends me to another universe.

He licks my hole, flattening his tongue and sliding over it. He takes his time, kissing and sucking all of my most sensitive spots, and I writhe beneath him, my hands tangling in his hair and my hips thrusting as much as possible while I'm pinned under his weight.

God, this man is everything.

Just as another moan leaves my lips, he pulls back and taps my butt cheek.

"On all fours, lycan," he orders, and I quickly oblige. When I get settled, Lev positions himself behind me and spreads my cheeks with both hands. "God, this hole is going to be so fun to fill," he says.

I fall forward onto my elbows as he licks me again, a swipe that goes from behind my balls to the top of my crack.

I moan and feel him nip at the butt dimples above my cheeks. "These are fucking sexy." He kisses each globe of my ass. "These are fucking sexy." He reaches around and strokes me. "This is fucking sexy." I'm panting now. "And this"—he kisses and sucks and licks my hole again—"is fucking sexy." That last one is muffled as his face is in my crack.

I'm so close to coming now that I flatten my palms on the bedsheet to distract myself. It barely helps, though, not with how fucking good he is at this.

Saliva drips from where he's licking and sucking, spilling over the back of my balls, and he spears his tongue into me over and over, fucking me a

few times with it as he loosens me and opens me. Then he licks me again, and it's almost too much. I reach back and squeeze his side.

"Lev, please. I'm going to blow," I say breathlessly.

He grabs my hips and flips me around again, kneeling between my legs. His cock is so hard it's flat against his stomach, precum spilling over the tip. Mine is leaking all over me, too, and the desire to bring myself to finish is so strong. He captures my lips, and I taste my saltiness on him.

Lev pulls back and gives me a serious look. "I want to fuck you, lycan. I want to take this ass, but I need to know you're okay with it and want the same."

He could tell me that he wanted to chop each of my fingers off at this point, and I would say yes. I'm so wrapped up in the moment that I'd give him anything.

I nod. "I want it. I really fucking want it."

Lev smiles and kisses me again, long, languid kisses that slow everything down. Then he pulls away and leans over to the bedside table to open the top drawer. He pulls out a bottle of lube and a strip of condoms, and he rips one of the condoms off the strip before putting the rest back, leaving the drawer open.

"Let me prep you more," he says, opening the lube and dripping a generous amount on his fingers. He swipes over me, making me gasp. Then he gently starts rubbing my entrance with his thumb. His breathing is heavy as he holds my gaze. "You're fucking amazing, little lycan. Fucking beautiful."

He pushes a little on my hole, and the tip of his thumb presses in. I puff out a breath at how good he feels. How good his words feel. He removes his thumb, adds a little more lube, and switches to his index finger, pressing in gently until his knuckle breaches my ring of muscle. I gasp at the intrusion, my dick leaking.

He alternates between kissing and nipping my inner calf and massaging my thigh as he works his fingers into me, opening me and getting me prepped for his rather impressive cock. I languidly stroke myself, caught up in the moment and slowly falling apart from the pleasure coursing through my body. One finger turns into two, and all the while, he's kissing me and rubbing me and saying sweet things to me. I'm mush. I'm a puddle of pleasure and ecstasy as he does his thing.

My hips buck as Lev moves his fingers inside of me, stretching me more.

“Fuuuckk yessss,” I moan. “More. I need more.”

He listens, thrusting into me with three fingers. It burns but rides on the cusp of pleasure. He’s opening and closing his fingers, stretching me and moving in and out, twisting and fucking me with them, and then he hits *that* spot. He caresses my bundle of nerves, and a sound that is nothing if not animalistic escapes me. It’s so guttural that I start to laugh. My dick jumps in response, and I feel myself squeezing around his fingers.

“Jesus fucking Christ that felt good,” I tell him, as he smiles down at me devilishly, that dimple deep in his cheek. He does it again, and my hips fly up. “Okay, seriously. You need to fuck me now because I’m gonna come like, yesterday.”

Lev chuckles and pulls his fingers out of me, giving one final pump with them as he does. He wipes them on the T-shirt lying on the bed and opens the condom. Rolling it on, he watches me the whole time. I hand him the bottle of lube, and he spreads a very generous amount on his sheathed cock.

“Fours,” he says, patting my thigh, and I roll over again, presenting him my ass. “Mmmm,” he hums. My insides warm. “You ready, lycan?” he asks, his voice gruff and gravely.

“Yes, Lev. Fuck me. I’m not going to last long,” I tell him. This has been the biggest exercise in edging I think I’ve ever had, and I’m starting to ache. I need to come so badly.

“Mmmm, so ready for it. Okay,” he replies, lining up his tip to my hole.

I feel him very slowly start to press in, one hand on my ass cheek. His tip pushes inside, and the pressure and burn are intense. I tighten for a moment at the intrusion and take a deep breath. He’s much bigger than the fingers he had in me.

“Relax for me, Dare.” His voice is as smooth as butter, and it calms me. “Breathe and bare down on me.” He reaches around and strokes my dick while he sinks into me a little bit farther, inch by painstaking inch. Sparks erupt behind my eyes, and I drop to my elbows with a shudder. “That’s it,” he says, pushing the rest of the way in. “Mmmmmm. Fuck. My god you feel good.” His hand leaves my cheek and runs up the center of my back, then to the side of my hip where he grips. “Fuck, Dare. You’re so fucking tight. So tight and so fucking warm. I’m not going to last long, either.”

God, he’s big. I’m not a stranger to being a bottom, but this feels amazing. It also feels . . . different. Not in the way his cock feels inside me, but in the meaning behind it. We’re connected, intimately. This means

something more than just a fuck, and that's new to me. It makes everything more intense.

Lev's cock fills me completely now, and what started as stretching and discomfort quickly morphs into pleasure.

"Move. I need you to move!" I basically shout to him, as I feel my orgasm barreling down my spine like a freight train. Lev pulls out slowly and slides back in, and we both release a matching moan. He does it again, and as I loosen fully for him, he's able to move faster. He quickly finds a rhythm, breathing along with the lascivious sound of our skin smacking as he fucks me. "Ooohhhmygod, Lev. Harder, please. Fuck. Harder."

Lev grabs my hips and slams in me, both of us grunting and moaning. I'm meeting him thrust for thrust, pushing back into him as he fucks into me. I can't help but grip the sheets in front of me, holding on for dear life. My dick is weeping, and I can't hold out much longer. I grab the base tightly to try to hold off my orgasm, but it's no use. It crashes into me, and I shout as hot streams of cum jet out of me, causing me to push back into Lev. He meets me at every stroke, and after only a few more thrusts, he grips me harder. His hips stutter as he pushes as deeply as he can into me, moaning and calling out my name. His heavy breathing shudders, and he pushes in and stalls, repeating the action until he's empty. Then he collapses on top of me, forcing my legs out and blanketing me with his big, hard body.

"God damn," he whispers, panting.

My heart's still racing, and I exhale a short breath. "Fuck."

He takes a few more seconds to catch his breath and then pushes up off of my body, his soft cock leaving me. I immediately feel the emptiness and make a whimpering sound, purposely this time. He kisses my shoulder and chuckles as he stands up and heads to the bathroom.

While he's in the bathroom, it hits. The shame and guilt. It hits me like a ton of fucking bricks, and my stomach lurches as my mind starts racing with the realization of what we just did and what it means.

No, no, no. I don't want to feel this.

What just happened was amazing and beautiful, and I shouldn't feel this shame and doubt and guilt. Overwhelming guilt. Guilt that I have Lev and neither of us have Nate.

Lev comes back with a warm washcloth and starts to clean me up. I roll over and stop him, forcing a smile and taking the cloth. I try not to look at

him, as hard as it is. I don't want to have to explain what's going on in my head right now, though I'm sure the turmoil is swirling in my eyes. He's still glistening with sweat but looks fucking amazing. Blissful I may even dare to say. When I'm done, he cleans himself and comes back to bed, handing me the bottle of water we brought into his room when we first got here. I drink it and start to lie down.

"Are you okay?" he asks, giving me a kiss that I return as a peck. "Was that . . ."

I put my hand on his arm but look away. "That was more than okay," I reassure him.

He doesn't seem to buy it. He lies down and motions for me to join him. When I settle down onto the bed, he spoons me, holding me tightly to him. It feels so good. He's still warm, and his chest against my back is just perfect. He kisses my neck and my hair and my ear and pulls me closer.

"Hey, he says softly, "are you sure you're okay?"

I nod, although there's a lump forming in my throat. Thankfully, Lev seems to accept my answer or at least sense that what I'm holding back is too big and too heavy for right now. Thank fuck for that.

He kisses my neck again, giving me a squeeze at the same time. "Good night, little lycan."

"Night, Lev," I manage to whisper.

He laces his fingers through mine and holds me until I hear his breathing even out and I know he's asleep. I, however, lie awake and try to fight off the thoughts that are threatening to ruin one of the best things that ever happened to me.

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Chapter 42

Levon

When I wake up the next morning, my bed is cold, and there's no warm body near me. Sitting up, I get a sinking feeling in my stomach.

I'm alone, and the side of the bed that Dare was on when we fell asleep last night is empty.

I reach out and run my hand over the sheets, but they're cold too. My heart stumbles as I glance up toward the bathroom. The door is open, the light off.

Fuck.

I flop onto my back with an exasperated sigh and run my hand through my hair. *What the fuck?* After dragging myself out of bed, I go to the bathroom and relieve myself, then I wash my hands and splash water on my face.

Maybe he's in the living room or kitchen. Maybe he couldn't sleep.

That has to be it, right?

Padding out to the living room, I look around, but it's as empty as my bed. He's not there. Or in the kitchen.

"FUCK!" I shout as I slam my hand down on the island.

I head back to my room and slump down on the edge of the bed. His clothes, which he discarded rather haphazardly last night, are nowhere to be

found. I cover my face with my hands as I realize the only real explanation.

He left.

I reach for my phone, hoping that maybe he texted me. I hope there wasn't an emergency or anything. If there was, he would have let me know. He would have woken me up or something. Or at least I'd like to think so.

I open my phone, and my heart plummets. I have no new messages. No notifications of any kind. He fucking left. Again. And this time, it's different because we didn't just have sex last night. It wasn't just a hookup. It was more than that. It was sex that actually meant something, and I know he fucking felt it too. My feelings for him were so strong last night, everything amplified. I knew something amazing was blooming between us.

And yet he fucking left.

Something happened right before we settled in to sleep last night. Some little shift in his eyes. He seemed bothered. Enough that I had to ask him if he was okay. I should have pushed him more then. I should have made him talk to me. But I was so content and tired that I just wanted to hold him and enjoy the moment before we went to sleep.

Dammit. I should have done more. I knew something was off.

If things are going to progress with us, we have to talk. We have so much to work on. We have to be able to talk through this stuff.

I run my hands through my hair and over my face, frustrated. Letting out a huge sigh, I slowly get up and grab my phone.

I open my texts and start to type one out, but I stop after just the first word. I don't want to text him in the heat of the moment. I should definitely give myself time to cool down.

I set my phone back on the nightstand and head into the bathroom for a shower. Twenty minutes later, I'm showered and dressed, and sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee. I don't really feel much calmer, but at least the sting of anger has dulled.

I open up my phone again, take a deep breath, and start typing out a message.

> Me: Hey. I woke up to an empty bed this morning. That was not what I expected. Let me know you're okay.

I delete it and start again, thinking it sounded like I was annoyed. I'm not annoyed. I'm hurt.

Me: Hey. I hope everything is okay—I woke up to an empty bed this morning and it made me sad.

That sounds pathetic. Deleted.

Me: Hey Lycan. I woke up to an empty bed this morning after an amazing night. I hope you are okay. Talk to me.

Finally satisfied with my text, I send it and put my phone on the couch beside me as I lie my head back on the pillows. I wish he was here, with me. I think it’s safe to say that last night did something to me. I gave a big piece of myself to Dare. I can only hope with time he realizes that and maybe feels the same.

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Chapter 43

Darian

Lev: Hey. So it's been a few days now. I guess you need space? I just need to know you're okay.

Lev: Dare…?

Sitting heavily in the Adirondack chair out on the patio at my house, I reread the text that Lev sent the day after the bonfire. I have lost count how many times I have read it. I open my little tin can and pull out a joint. After lighting it up and putting it to my lips, I take a deep inhale and hold it for a moment before blowing it out. Just that act has my nerves calming and my brain quieting. I need to get myself together and figure a few things out on my own before I continue whatever this is with Lev. I plan on talking to him about it soon, but I need to work out a few things for me first. I just hope I'm doing the right thing.

I lean my head back on the chair and let the cold air accost my neck. I've been in a spiral of frustration and self-loathing since I snuck out of Lev's house the morning after the bonfire. I've been mulling the situation over in

my head and feel a bit of guilt and a lot of remorse for just leaving Lev's like I did. I'm also being a brat because I haven't responded to any of his texts for more than a few days, and all I've really been doing is drinking, smoking, and sleeping when I can, which, if I'm honest, hasn't been much. I'm more desperate for touch than I've ever been, after getting so much from Lev recently. I've thought about calling Lance several times, but I've managed to hold back. I'm still hopeful that something will work out with Lev, and I don't want to have anything mess that up if it does.

I run all of the thoughts that I'm having through my head about eight hundred times a day, replaying our time together from when Lev met me in the parking lot at the lake. I play it through, like a movie, up to the point where I leave his house after he took me in his bed. Sex with him was otherworldly, and maybe that's part of the reason I'm having such a hard time with it. I mean, couldn't he have been an asshole in bed and not cared about my pleasure or comfort or something? Instead, he was sexy and demanding and gentle, all at the same time. It felt like he really cared about me and that he wasn't just using me to get off. It was different. It felt like it meant something.

And so, like every fucked-up person would do, I freaked out and ran away.

I'll admit that I'm embarrassed and sad and frustrated. I think it's more at myself than the irrational feelings of anger and . . . angst toward Lev. Puffing again, I blow out the side of my mouth and survey the backyard. It's cold tonight, but I'm wearing my favorite onesie pajamas. They're ridiculous, but they're my favorite, and they're warm, so I enjoy them. They sort of feel like a warm hug, which I desperately need right now.

I stay outside until my teeth are chattering. Then I snuff out the joint, put the unused half back into the tin, and close it. I grab everything and go back into the house.

I'm feeling pretty messed up by this point, but I go upstairs and settle on the bed again. I think that there's an indentation in the mattress from the amount of time that I've spent in this spot lately. I check my phone, but I don't have any new messages.

There's a bag of pretzels and a bottle of beer on my nightstand from earlier, and I open the pretzels and start to eat, grabbing my notebook so I can sketch a bit. I write a few notes so that I feel productive before putting it to the side and taking a swig from the bottle. I know these are not the best coping skills, and I should probably go for a walk or work out or some shit, but when these moods hit me, I hermit and just want to be alone. I take another drink from

the bottle, letting the thin liquid warm my throat as it travels down, and then I crawl into my bed.

After a long nap, I spend some time cleaning the house, and then I take a shower and clean myself up. I feel like shit, and I know it's nothing but my fault that I'm feeling this way. I try to let the stream of hot water wash away the feelings of guilt and disgust that I have for myself, and I end up staying in the shower way too long.

When I get out, I throw on some underwear, chug a bunch of water, refill my cup, and grab a sandwich. When the dryer buzzer goes off, I put my onesie pajamas back on.

What? I said they were my favorite!

Then I decide to text Ryan.

Me: What are you doing?

Ryan: Eating dinner with Katie. You?

Me: Nothing. You guys doing something tonight?

Ryan: No. She's going out with her sister. I was going to go to The Exchange. Need company? Come along.

I'm not in the mood to go out, but I could use some company to finalize these thoughts and my next steps. It would help to have someone to talk this over with.

Me: Not up to going out. I drank enough this week. *barf emoji* But come over?

Ryan: You okay?

Me: Yeah, I will be but it'd be cool to hang out.

Ryan: Okay, I'll be over in about an hour.

I liked Ryan's text with a thumbs up emoji to acknowledge that I saw it and that an hour is good, then I get more water. I'm so thirsty.

After getting comfortable on the couch, I put on a documentary about a serial killer. I must doze off for one of the first times in a week, however, because I hear the doorbell ring sometime later, and it startles me. I get up and go to the door. Ryan's on the other side, and I motion him in. He follows me into the family room, laughing at my pajamas. He's seen them before, so they aren't a total shock to him, but he teases me nonetheless. He goes into the kitchen and grabs a beer, then joins me in the family room. He settles on the oversized leather chair across from where I'm sitting and takes a large pull of his beer.

"So," he says, looking at me, "what's going on? You talked to Lev?"

I sigh and tap my thigh with my fingers, playing out the beat of the music that I was listening to earlier. "I haven't."

"Ohmygod, Dare. Why? Hasn't it been almost a week!?" The expression on his face is basically telling me I'm an idiot.

"I don't know. I mean, he's texted a few times, but nothing serious, and I haven't offered, so . . ." I let the conversation hang between us. Ryan just looks at me. I finally speak. "I have all these weird feelings about him swirling around, and I don't know what to do."

"You don't know what to do? What do you mean you don't know what to do? Dude, you like him. You liked him before you even had hair on your balls." I throw a pillow at him. He catches it and puts it in his lap, laughing. "Seriously, though."

I sigh. "I know. And I had hair on my balls at thirteen, by the way."

"Whatever," he jokes, rolling his eyes at me.

I continue. "I guess I just have all these things in my head. Like, he was Nate's. I was always the tagalong. Do I have a right to him now? Is that dumb?"

Ryan leans forward, trying to make eye contact with me. "Dare," he says, his voice soft, "Nate was his best friend, sure. But the guy has feelings for you *now*. Nate's not here, dude. And even if he was, do you really think he would not want the two most special people in his life to be happy?"

Tears start to burn behind my eyes. I rest my head on the back of the couch and stare at the ceiling so Ryan doesn't see me on the verge of falling apart.

He tosses the pillow back at me. "Look. You're a good guy, D. From what I've seen of Lev, he is too. You deserve a little happiness and someone to love you. If you can find what I found with Katie, it's well worth it. And why wouldn't you want that for yourself?"

I can’t help the tears now. I turn my head to look at him, and he shrugs as he takes the final swig of his beer. I just laugh because I don’t know what else to do. I think that’s the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me. “Dude.”

He laughs, too. “Fuck you, dude. You’re a sappy sack of shit. Just talk to him, okay?” I nod and swipe a tear away. “Got anything to smoke?”

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Chapter 44

Levon

I get to the shop early this morning because I haven't been sleeping well. Uncle John isn't here working on anything, so I go to the back office and fire up the computer. Being alone is probably for the best right now.

It's Sunday, and it's been an entire fucking week since Dare left my apartment without a word. I'm about to crawl out of my skin. He still hasn't responded to any of my texts or anything. I've checked my phone about eighty thousand times since last week, and I don't know what to do.

I need to do *something*, though.

My sister's off of work today, and so after I settle at my desk with a cup of coffee, I text her to see if she's free. Maybe talking to someone about this will help. She texts back almost immediately to tell me that she has plans to hang out with Julian later but that she's at our parents' house now. I ask her to come over to the shop so I can talk to her.

An hour later, Lindsey texts me that she is at the front door to the shop, and I jump up out of my chair and hurry out of the office to let her in. She hands me a travel cup filled with warm liquid.

“I stopped for hot chocolate on the way over,” she says, coming inside and shutting the door behind her.

I take a sip and give an approving “mmmm." Then I lead the way to the office in the back, and we make ourselves comfortable.

“So,” she starts, looking at me pointedly. “Boy trouble?” Her face scrunches up, the dark lipstick on her lips disappearing as she flattens her lips and pulls them inward.

I chuckle. “How’d you know?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she mocks. “An ominous text on a random Sunday morning by my big brother, asking if I’m free to talk? Kind of a dead giveaway, Lev.”

I blow air out and tilt my head back. “I don’t know what to do,” I tell her. She looks at me with her big blue eyes, encouraging me to go on. “He came back to my place after the bonfire last weekend. But you know that,” I add quickly as she smiles and nods.

“Yeah. Katie and Jenna were in the diner the other night and said he was with Ryan recently. What did he say when you guys talked again?” There’s a twisting feeling in my gut, and I’m not sure how to answer her. Her face goes serious. “Lev, please don’t tell me you haven’t talked to him since the bonfire.” I stay silent. “What the hell, Lev!?” She swats me on the arm.

“Owwww! I know, Linds. I know. I need to do something, but I thought I was giving him time, and I thought he needed to be alone. Then one day ran into the other, and now it’s a week later and I haven’t heard from him and”—I breathe—“I miss him.”

“Oh my GOD,” she huffs. “Why are you so archaic? Talk to him, Lev!”

“Archaic?” I repeat, raising my eyebrows at her.

“Yes, Lev. Archaic,” she repeats. “You mean you haven’t tried to talk to him since *Sunday*?”

“I texted him several times,” I say quietly. I suddenly feel like a fool. Saying these things out loud and seeing and hearing Lindsey’s reaction just brings to light what I think I was afraid of and that’s that I should have talked to him. I should have called Dare and forced a conversation with him to figure out what is going on.

The thing is, I tried. There were several times this week that I had his number pulled up on my phone to call him and then chickened out. For some reason, I got nervous and couldn’t do it.

“Lev,” my sister says, a little softening in her tone, “what do you want from this . . . thing with Dare? I’m going to say relationship, because the way you two were at the bonfire, that’s what it was. So do *you* know what you want out of this?”

That’s a no-brainer for me, and I tell her that. “I want him. I want to get to know him better and care for him and be with him. I want to . . . I want *him*, Linds.”

She puffs her bottom lip out in a pout and scoots closer to me so she can put her hand on my forearm. “You really like him, don’t you?” I nod in confirmation. She takes in a deep breath and lets it out. “I think you need to go to him and talk,” she tells me.

My head snaps up, and my eyes meet hers. “I . . . I want to, but it’s . . . um . . . I just . . .” She arches her eyebrows at me, waiting for me to explain myself. “I’ve only been in their house like once since Nate died. And Dare lives there. I haven’t been there, Linds. I don’t know if I can go through all that again.”

She takes her hand off my forearm and plays with the lid of her hot chocolate. I can tell she’s contemplating how to say whatever she’s about to say to me. She takes a breath and looks up at me. “Lev, I mean this with the most love I can give you.” *Here we go.* At least her voice is sincere. “I think you need to get over yourself and the house thing and go to him.”

Her words slam into me. She’s right, and I know she is.

“What happens if he decides that he doesn’t want this? Or me? What if I waited too long and let this go on too long without saying anything or doing anything? Now I’m worried that I messed it up.” My voice sounds like I’ve swallowed gravel, and my throat feels like it too.

God, I’m so pathetic.

I’m a twenty-four-year-old man who’s too scared to go back to a house that was familiar close to a decade ago to have a conversation with someone I have strong feelings for.

“Well, then you tell him that you want him and what you want out of this *relationship*. If he doesn’t want you, that’s his choice, right? But somehow, I don’t think that’s going to be the case. He’s gone for you, Lev. As much as you are for him. It’s obvious. He just handles things differently. He’s used to being alone and closing off. He’s probably scared. Worried. He went through some dark times while you were gone, you know?”

Neither of us speak for a few minutes, but her words swirl around in my head. I know she's right. I need to talk to him.

Lindsey finally breaks the silence again. "The longer you wait, the harder it's going to be," she tells me quietly.

"Yeah" is about all I can get out. Lindsey doesn't force me, and she doesn't try to push the conversation. That's one of my favorite things about my sister. She reads me so well.

"You going to be okay?" she asks me.

I nod. "Yeah. I have to talk to him," I state the obvious.

She stands up and stretches. "I have to get ready for Julian. Go get your man," she tells me, giving me a big smile. Where I have one dimple, Lindsey has two, and they're showing themselves now.

I laugh and pull her into a hug. "Thank you, sissy."

She rubs her hands up and down my back, squeezing me in. "I love you, big brother. You got this. And for what it's worth, I like him for you." She giggles, pulling away.

I smile at her. "Love you. Thank you." I walk her to the front door of the shop and tell her to have a good time tonight on her date. Then I take a deep breath.

It's time.

I need to go talk to Dare.

My conversation with Lindsey barreling through my head over and over, I pace around the shop for several minutes, trying to figure out what I want to say and how I want to approach Dare. I run various scenarios through my head, speaking some of them out loud and then talking to myself again when they don't sound right to me. I finally decide that whatever happens at this point is up to him. That's an uncomfortable thought to me, because I'm afraid that it could be something I don't want to hear. But I have to do it anyway.

My sister helped me to see that I can only lay it out there and let him figure out what he wants to do. We have to talk if I want the relationship to grow.

As ready as I can possibly be, I lock up the shop, hop in my car, and start on my way to the Archers' house, my stomach in knots. I remember all those years I spent riding this road daily, first on my bicycle and then when I got my license the fall before Nate died. The bile rises in my throat as I get closer.

I pull into the driveway next to Dare’s car and kill the engine so I’m not tempted to back out and leave again. The anxiety is strong, though, and I feel like I’m starting to head into a tailspin.

I take a few deep breaths and talk myself into going to the door. Even though I practiced the conversation that I want to have with him several times, it all disappears when I get to the front door. I stop on the welcome mat, wiping my palms on my jeans, and then I clench and unclench my hands into fists a few times.

You can do this. You like him. Make it happen.

I reach up and knock on the front door three times in rapid succession. Beads of sweat are gathering at the base of my neck. No one answers the door, so I knock another three times, a little more forcefully. After what feels like an hour (but is probably only a minute or so), I hear footsteps inside the house and see a silhouette of someone in the window. I shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans and lift my shoulders to my ears, nervous energy buzzing through my body.

The door opens, and I’m dumbfounded by what I see standing in front of me.

Are those . . . Is that . . .

I try to hide my smile as my eyes roam up and down Dare’s body, taking in his fuzzy onesie pajamas. The feet have paws, and there’s a stuffed wolf head as a hood—ears and all. I try not to laugh, but he also looks so incredibly adorable that I can’t help myself from grinning.

I quickly sober up, however, when he drops his hand from the doorknob and looks at me with his piercing green eyes. They cloud over when he makes direct eye contact with me, and he swallows thickly, his Adam’s apple sliding up and down.

“Lev,” he whispers.

“Hey,” I say. I can barely force the word out of my throat.

“Hey yourself,” Dare whispers.

“I, um—”

“Do you want to—”

We chuckle at the fact that we both started talking at the same time, and I realize he’s as nervous as I am. Without another word, Dare steps to the side and gestures, inviting me into the house.

I take a deep breath and force myself to walk inside. I am met with a smell that knocks my breath out of my lungs. It’s extremely familiar and

immediately reminds me of Nate and all the time we used to spend together in this house. The scent is a little different than it was when we were kids, but it's familiar enough that it evokes a string of memories, most of them good. I close my eyes for a second and take it all in as Dare closes the door behind us.

He doesn't pause to give me any time to settle, however, and instead, he moves around me and starts toward the kitchen.

"Look, Dare—"I start, at the same time that he also says, "What are you __"

Neither of us laugh this time.

We stop at the island in the kitchen, and I put both hands on the smooth granite and inhale deeply through my nose. Turning around, I lean my tailbone against the island and put my hands behind me, resting the heels of them on the counter. The words tumble out of me unexpectedly, and it's nothing that I practiced at home. "Why did you leave?"

Dare spins on me, and I don't expect it. "Why did *I* leave?" he scoffs.

I freeze. I'm slightly confused. My voice is calm, but my heart is pounding in my chest. "Yes, Dare. Why did you leave? I thought . . . the bonfire . . . the date . . . I thought . . . I-I brought you home, and I thought it was . . . it was fucking *amazing*. And I woke up in the morning, and you . . . you were gone. And I haven't heard from you for over a week! What the fuck happened?"

Dare rubs his hand down his face, pulling his lips down when his hand hits his chin. His lip ring catches my eye, and I want nothing more than for us to be back to the way things were. I want to feel that ring between my lips, play with it with my tongue, and taste him with the delicious obstruction of the ring between us.

"I freaked out, Lev. Everything was so good, and you're so . . . you're so . . ." He gestures up and down the length of my body. "You're so *you*, and I've wanted—" He takes a deep breath. "I've wanted you for so long." The last part of his sentence catches in his throat. I can only look at him and wait for whatever else he has to say. "And after we . . . after we had sex the night of the bonfire, I got overwhelmed because . . . because you're Nate's, not mine." Tears are pooling in his eyes. "I mean, what right do I have to you?"

I'm stunned. Whatever I thought he was going to say, it wasn't that. "I'm Nate's!?" My voice comes out louder than I intend for it to. "What does that

even mean?”

He sniffs. “Lev, I’ve been dealing with this for a long time. Clearly a lot longer than you have. This—this—this . . . guilt. This anger.”

“Anger?”

“Yeah, Lev. Anger.” The volume of Dare’s voice also rises, and his cheeks flush a light shade of pink. “I lost *everything* when Nate died. EVERYTHING.” A tear spills over his lid, creating a trail of sadness down his cheek. “I thought maybe, just maybe the *one* thing I would still have would be someone who meant something to Nate . . . to *me*. But you left. YOU left!” He crosses his arms around his midsection, pulling into himself.

“Dare . . .” I reach for him, but he backs away. “I . . . I was hurting,” I say quietly, lowering my arm and fighting to keep my voice steady. “I needed to get out of here—to get away. I was drowning. I was hurting so bad, Darian.” My heart is cracking open, raw and irritated from this all coming back. “I was broken.”

Another tear falls from his eye. He doesn’t bother wiping it away. “But I NEEDED YOU,” he sobs.

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Chapter 45

Darian

The minute the words leave my mouth, I regret them. I realize how much pain they carry, and everything starts to collapse around me. I can't help it, but I crumple, unable to even hold myself up anymore. Without any sort of grace, I slump to the floor, my elbows on my knees and hands over my face, my body trembling. My heart seizes in my chest when Lev drops to the floor beside me, pulling me into him.

He holds me against his chest as I cry. My sobs fill the room, and the harder I cry, the tighter Lev's hold on me gets. Words come out of his mouth in a whisper, and I have to strain to hear him.

"I'm sorry, Dare. I'm so sorry. It's okay. Let it out. I'm here. I've got you. It's okay." His lips brush the side of my head, and he kisses my temple. His hand comes up to stroke my hair. "It hurts. I know it hurts. I'm so sorry."

Somewhere in the timeline, I wrap my arms around his waist and bury my head in his chest. I don't even know when that happened. My shirt is wet from my tears, and so is Lev's.

I’m not even sure how long we stay on the floor, wrapped around each other, but eventually my sobs stop, my breathing starts to even out, and my body stops trembling. Lev doesn’t let go, and he continues pressing soft, light kisses to my temple. He starts slowly rocking us back and forth and gently loosens the hold he has on me, making sure to still keep his arms around me. I gradually get up enough strength to pull away from him and look at him. He uses his thumbs to wipe the residual tears from my cheeks as I sniffle. His cheeks are wet with tears, too, and my heart clenches. I didn’t even realize he was crying along with me. Wordlessly, I reach up and brush my thumbs over the wetness on his skin.

The air is tense, and we just stare at each other for a moment. I want to say something or move, but I’m too fucking exhausted. My limbs are heavy, and although I’m not wrapped around Lev anymore, I am leaning on him.

He inhales a breath. “Come on,” he says, shifting his weight so he can help me stand up.

I follow his lead as he stands, extending his hand for me to take it. He pulls me up into a hug. I hug him back.

We stand for a few minutes in our embrace, and he eventually breaks it to lead us to the couch. Lev sits down, and I crawl on after him. I settle myself with my head in his lap. He strokes my hair, twisting strands between his fingers. We sit in silence for a while, sometimes looking at each other and sometimes not really able to hold that eye contact.

“I’m really sorry for leaving,” I say, finally breaking the silence. “For what it’s worth, that night was amazing, and I . . .” I bite my bottom lip, sucking my lip ring into my mouth. “I’d like to do it again and maybe not leave this time?”

Lev gives me a gorgeous smirk. He sets the palm of his hand over my forehead and rests it there. “I’d like that, too.” He full on smiles at me, and my heart fucking soars. Maybe we’re going to be able to continue this thing we’ve been building after all.

“For what it’s worth,” Lev starts, “when I left for Sheltonville, I didn’t know that I was leaving you.”

I shake my head. “Lev, you don’t have to—”

“I do,” he interrupts, taking one of my hands in his and entwining our fingers. I can tell he’s apprehensive, but he takes a deep breath and says, “Let me get this out.” Then he continues. “I didn’t know that I was leaving you. I knew that your family was dealing with grief for something that’s

never supposed to happen. I was spiraling. I was so fucked up that I was drinking and doing some really bad shit, Dare. If I had stayed around here, I might have ended up in the same situation as Nate. I was on a bad path. I had to go."

"You left two years before you left for Sheltonville," I say. I know it stings because I can see the pain cross over his face, but it seems like I can't keep any of this inside anymore. "Once we buried him, you were done. Gone. You guys all did your thing, and I was here, stuck. I was young, so I guess I was hoping you'd still come around. I should have known better."

I can feel Lev trembling, and he holds my hand more tightly. "I never meant to hurt you, Dare. Never. I liked that we were friends. I never minded you hanging around, and you probably don't know, but I would give Nate so much shit when he was so mean to you."

I close my eyes and take a shaky breath. My heart flutters at his words. "I know that. I just . . . I crushed on you so hard, and I was grasping for anything that would anchor me and keep his memory alive. That was you, and when you left, you took that anchor." One lone tear falls out of the corner of my eye, and he brushes it away gently with his thumb. I continue. "I shouldn't blame you. I know I shouldn't. This anger I have is so ridiculous. It's irrational, I know. But it's been here for a long time, and I don't know how to deal with it. You were just another person who walked away."

He nods. "Fuck, Dare. I'm so sorry."

We sit quietly for a few minutes before Lev whispers, "I miss him."

"Me too."

Another round of silence follows, and Lev starts playing with my fingers again, tracing and moving his through mine in a fluid motion.

"Will you stay tonight?" I ask tentatively.

He shifts in his seat and clears his throat. "If you want me to, I'd like that."

I sit up and adjust myself, straddling him on the couch. His hands find my waist, and he rubs slowly up and down my sides, letting out a chuckle.

"What?" I ask, resting my forearms on his shoulders.

"These are ridiculous," he tells me.

I feign offense, wiggling my butt on his thighs. He lets out a groan.

"I beg your pardon," I tease as I settle my weight on his lap. "They *happen* to be the most comfortable and incredible pajamas ever!" I pull the

stuffed wolf head over my head to show him and smirk.

Lev shakes his head, laughing.

“Kiss me,” I say, giving him all of the permission he needs. And he does. He kisses me until our lips are swollen and our breathing turns to panting, and every moment of it is glorious.

Our kisses are heated as Lev runs his hands up and down my sides. Then he pulls back to look at me, and I lick my lips to taste his kiss. I’m turned on, but I also just love this closeness. Leaning down, I rest my head on his shoulder, and he keeps me anchored to his lap, his hand stroking lightly up my back. I inhale deeply and breathe him in. He smells so good. His neck is warm, too, and I press my lips against him, letting my tongue dart out to taste his skin. It’s fresh and beautiful and smells like soap and sandalwood and just . . . man. Lev moans quietly, and I kiss him again, then turn my head and close my eyes. I’ve missed this so much the last few days.

We sit like that for a while, and it’s freaking bliss—the closeness and contact and warmth, Lev’s arms around me. I’m so comfortable that I almost fall asleep. But then Lev stops rubbing my back and taps the outside of my hip. I sit up with a groan, not wanting to break the contact. He smirks at me with a devilish grin.

“Ready to go to bed, baby?” he asks in almost a whisper.

The roughness of his tone makes me shiver. I shift over him and cover his mouth with mine in a passionate kiss, and when I pull away, I get up, using his chest to push myself off of his lap. I extend my hand, and Lev takes it, letting me pull him up from the couch.

I lead him upstairs to my room, then close and lock the door behind me. I turn on the soft light lamp on my desk, and Lev starts taking his shirt off. I watch for a minute, enamored by this man, standing in my bedroom. His broad shoulders and pecs are on display as he reaches for the waistband of his pants. My mouth waters in anticipation as he lowers them down his legs. His black cotton boxer briefs hug every muscle and curve in his legs and thighs and accent his bulge perfectly. I lick my lips and give him my best sexy eyes.

He laughs. “Like what you see, little lycan?” he teases, coming a step closer to me.

“Mm-hmm,” I reply, reaching out and running my hands down his chest. His cock jumps in his boxers as my fingertips graze over his nipples and his

abs. My dick is starting to wake up as well. I take a deep breath and kiss him quickly.

Lev runs his hands around my back to grip my ass and freezes, letting out a chuckle.

“What?” I ask innocently.

“Is this”—he reaches for the zipper in the back of the onesie and starts to unzip it across the back of my rear end—“for easy access?” He laughs and presses against me, pushing me into the dresser. His hands slide into the opening in the back, and I moan as he reaches inside. Both of his hands grab and squeeze my ass cheeks. Then, he continues to crowd me into the dresser while he slides his hands up the front, grazing my hardening dick and then my bare torso. I shiver again and press back into him, closing my eyes and soaking in the heady feeling of his touch and his rock-hard cock against my ass.

“Yes,” I breathe out, finally able to respond to his question. “It’s easy access.”

He laughs softly and turns me around, giving me a kiss. I take off the wolf onesie and lift the covers on the bed for Lev to crawl in. He does, grunting as he moves his way to the other side of the bed. I turn off the light on the desk and climb into bed, too, snuggling under the covers facing away from him.

We both lie there for a moment in silence, and I’m gearing myself up to make the first move when suddenly, his arm reaches between my legs and a hand flattens on my stomach. Another hand reaches around my shoulder, and before I know it, Lev is hauling my entire body back against his.

“Get over here,” he says.

I let out an unexpected huff because I did not expect to be manhandled like that, and let me just say, I loved every single second of it. I wiggle my ass and snuggle into him, letting him be the big spoon. He laughs.

“What are you doing to me, lycan?” he whispers in my ear.

We settle into one another, his hand draped over my waist, and I entwine my fingers through his. He lets out a sigh at the same time I do, and I fall into a cozy, warm, deep sleep.

***

A body presses against me, rocking back and forth. There’s a dick poking me in the back and a hand tugging my underwear off. I have to fight to bring myself out of my sleeping state, but when I come to my senses and realize what it is happening, it doesn't take long. I help, wiggling my legs and pushing them off my feet. The hard dick occasionally slides in my crack. Lips brush against my shoulder and back, and a tongue presses behind my ear. Lev works his way around to lick my earlobe, then takes it between his teeth and pushes his hard length against me.

“Need you,” he growls.

Just those two words, and I’m done for. I lean up and grab some lube and a condom from my bedside drawer. My cock is waking up quickly, even as I lie back down, and Lev’s lips cover mine in a passionate kiss as he shifts over me silently. He takes the lube from me, and I hear the snick of the lid. Like Pavlov’s dog, my dick jets up so that it’s lying on my stomach. I feel him pushing himself into my thigh, grinding against me as he wets his fingers with the lube. Then he taps my leg, and I bend my knee, opening a little bit to give him access to my hole.

Lev props himself up on his elbow as his other hand reaches under my leg, and he starts to tease my hole, running circles around the edge. Goose bumps erupt on my skin, and I suck in a breath. He leans down to kiss me as he circles again. Then he pulls back as he pushes the tip of his finger inside me.

I groan, my head falling back on the pillows.

Lev works me softly, wet and gentle for a few minutes, and one finger turns to two. I’m writhing on the bed, sounds coming out of me that should be embarrassing but aren’t. Lev alternates between kissing me, sucking my nipples, pushing fingers into my hole to stretch me, and occasionally curling his fingers to graze my prostate, making sparks shoot through my entire body. It’s incredible, and I’m more than ready for him, my dick leaking on my stomach.

“Lev, god. Please. I need you.” I finally break the non-talking sex. “Get-inside-me-now. Please.”

Lev snickers and sits up, wiping his fingers on his boxers. He moves between my legs, leaning down to give me another searing kiss. I tilt my head to give Lev better access to my neck, and he takes the invitation, his lips grazing along my skin. He kisses, licks, bites, sucks, and it’s quickly

overwhelming in the best way, though I don’t want to come before he’s inside me.

I push him off a little, making him sit up on his knees.

“You ready for me, lycan?” he asks, reaching for the condom. His magnificent dick is standing at attention, hard as can be as he sheaths himself with the rubber and drizzles a little more lube on himself. He grabs my legs under my thighs and lifts my hips. I’m completely exposed to him, and I should be more embarrassed than I am. “Ready?” he asks, and I nod, our eyes never breaking connection with each other.

Lev braces himself with one arm as he grips himself with his other hand. I feel him press the head of his cock against my entrance, and he slowly breaks through the first ring of muscle. The burn and stretch are glorious, and I moan as he leans down to kiss me again. He pushes in a little farther. I bear down on him, allowing another inch inside me.

With a groan, Lev leans forward and presses his hands into the mattress on either side of my shoulders. “Stroke yourself so I can get the rest of the way in.”

Closing my eyes, I reach down and grab my own dick, spreading the precum to use as lube while I rub myself. I moan loudly as Lev pushes the rest of himself into me. It feels so full and so amazing I have to take a minute to catch my breath. Lev must feel the same, because he just freezes with his forehead against mine.

“Jesus, Dare. You feel so fucking good.”

He pushes up again on his hands, and our eyes connect as he starts to move. He glides slowly in and out of me, occasionally hitting that group of nerves that make me whimper.

“Oh god, yes, Lev. Ohmygod. Fuck. Yes.” My hips move along with his, and I stroke myself, falling into pure ecstasy.

After another thrust, Lev removes my hand from my dick and laces his fingers through mine, pulling my arm above my head. He leans down and kisses me again, his tongue exploring my mouth. His hips are moving back and forth, swiveling every now and then, and his dick feels so good. So good. Breaking our kiss, Lev pushes up slightly, our fingers still wrapped around each other, and when his eyes meet mine again, his expression softens.

“So gorgeous,” he says.

I. Fucking. Soar.

This is different than anything I've ever felt. It's not just fucking. It's much more than that. We're connected on a different level.

My heart is pounding, and I close my eyes for a minute because the emotion is too much. Lev starts thrusting faster and a little bit harder.

"Feels good. You feel so fucking good." His rhythm becomes erratic. "I need you to come, Dare. I'm not going to last much longer."

I grab my shaft and start jerking, working myself until I feel sparks zapping down my spine. Suddenly, my body seizes, and I tumble over the edge, a moan that should be criminal escaping my lips. Warm jets of cum shoot all over my stomach and chest. My orgasm rips through me and pushes Lev over the edge as I pull him down with me. His hips stutter as he stills, his dick pulsing as he makes small pumps into me. He gasps, a bead of sweat dripping down his temple.

"Jesusfuckingchrist," he puffs out, and he collapses down onto me.

Both of us need to take a minute to catch our breaths, and we just lie in the mess on my chest as we come back to earth.

Eventually, Lev pushes his body up and gives me another kiss, his softening dick slipping out of my ass. With a spent grunt, he drags himself to his feet and takes the condom off, heading toward the bathroom. I hear water running, and a few minutes later, he comes back with a wet cloth. I give him a weak smile, still in my post-orgasm bliss. He wipes the mess off my chest and stomach, then folds the washcloth in half before using it to wipe himself off as well. When he's finished, he leans down, gives me another kiss, and then heads back into the bathroom. A short moment later, he crawls in bed with me again. I roll over, throw my leg over his thighs, and put my head on his chest with a contented sigh as he wraps me into his arms.

Lev chuckles. "You're amazing, Dare." He kisses my forehead.

I smile. "You're not so bad yourself, Lev." We doze back to sleep, sated and naked. I don't remember the last time I felt this happy and comfortable in my thoughts.

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Chapter 46

Levon

I'm sweating.

I open my eyes to a head on my chest and a leg thrown over me, just as it was when we fell back to sleep however many hours ago.

This morning was . . . unbelievable? Amazing? Whatever the word, it was *everything*. I needed to be inside Dare and feel that connection with him more than I think I've ever needed anything in my life.

A line of light peeks in through the side of Dare's curtains, and I wonder just how long we've been sleeping. I try to gently get out of the bed without waking him, but he must be waking up, too, because he pulls me closer.

"Noooooo," he whispers. "Stay."

I kiss his head and lift his arm, starting to sit up. "I'm hot, lycan."

"Yeah you are," he teases, rolling off of me and putting his arm over his eyes.

"I'm going to pee and get us some coffee, 'kay?" I crawl over him and find my underwear. Grimacing when I remember that I used it to wipe my fingers off last night, I drop it back on the floor and grab my pants instead.

After slipping them on, I pad into the bathroom, do my business, and clean myself up again, splashing water on my face and brushing my teeth. Then I quietly leave the bedroom. The hallway is much cooler, and goose bumps spread across my chest and arms as the air hits me. It feels good.

I shuffle down the stairs to the first floor and then into the kitchen, the familiar smell of the Archer house triggering so many memories. Us all hanging out around the island after a night goofing off in the basement. Mrs. Archer floating around the kitchen making breakfast for the group of us. Nate grinning and shoving a pancake into his mouth while the other guys laugh.

I spot the coffee maker and get some brewing. The clock on the microwave says that it's just after nine in the morning, and I have a fleeting thought that I should be at the shop, getting work done. But I'm also confident John is there, and he'll call me if he needs anything.

As the coffee brews, I grab a bottle of water out of the fridge and drink it quickly. It only manages to distract me for a moment, however, and then my eyes start to wander again. The place looks almost exactly the same as it does in my memories. Only now, it's empty—just me standing here. In my mind, it's loud and boisterous, and there's the whole bunch of us. We're kids again. In the kitchen, grabbing snacks from the pantry or eating meals at the table. In the living room, hanging out and watching movies or TV. Down in the basement—

My eyes trail to the basement door, and I steady myself against the island. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. That was where we spent most of our time. Video games, snacks, laughs, wrestling, drinking, smoking, and a bunch of other crazy shit. That's where most of my memories are.

I'm surprised, though, when the memories aren't as awful as I thought they would be. They're strong, but they bring more of a feeling of nostalgia than sadness.

Maybe it's because things are moving forward in such a great way with Dare. It takes the sting out of it all, feeling like I may still be part of this family.

I'm just turning to get two mugs out of the cabinet, searching for where they are, when I hear the garage door opening.

Shit, shit, shit. Someone's here.

I glance at the coffee pot to try and see how much longer until it's finished brewing. But I'm not sure, and just when I've decided to take off

and sprint up the stairs, Dare's father walks into the house from the garage. I freeze.

He stops with the door open, hand on the doorknob. I can't even imagine how odd this looks. There's a man in his kitchen, shirtless, making coffee in *his* house. My heart thuds in my chest.

"Oh, uh . . . hello? Who are you?" he asks. He carefully closes the door behind him, not taking another step into the kitchen. His face is as confused as it is angry.

"H-h-hi, Mr. Archer," I spit out. "Wow, yeah, so this . . . this is probably really weird."

He just raises his eyebrows.

"I . . . I'm so sorry. I, um . . . I . . . I'm Lev. Lev Richardson. I used to—"

He cuts me off. "Lev!? Oh my god. Lev, as in Nate's friend?" His face goes from recognition to a smile to pure confusion. "Lev, what are you doing in my kitchen half naked?"

I cross my arms over my torso to try to what? Cover my naked chest? Yeah, it doesn't do much at all. Grimacing, I drop my arms again and shove my hands in my pockets. "I, um, I'm so sorry. I just, um . . ."

Mr. Archer looks at me, stepping farther into the house. I assume he knows now that I'm not a threat, but that doesn't change the look of confusion on his face.

"It's good to see you again, Levon," he says, tossing his keys onto the island top. I swallow hard and nod at him. "I suppose I can probably guess why you're here."

Shame creeps up my face. He knows. He has to know that I spent the night with Dare. There's some weird tightness in my chest that's not entirely pleasant, and I suddenly have this sense that two separate timelines are colliding. I'm not sure how to handle it, so I just square my shoulders, spin around and quickly pour two cups of coffee now that the machine is done brewing, then grab the mugs and start toward the stairs.

"I, um, I'm just going to go up . . . take these upstairs. Nice to see you again," I stammer. I don't wait for a response, and instead, I head right to the steps and to Dare's bedroom door. I quickly sit one of the mugs on the floor, open the door with my free hand, and then grab the mug. Shutting the door behind me with my foot, I blow out a breath.

"Darian!" He bolts up into a sitting position. "Your *dad* is downstairs."

"My what!?" Dare's eyes widen like saucers. "My dad!?"

I start to laugh. I don’t know why I’m so worried about this. We’re both fully grown, adult men. I spent the night with my boyfriend, and—

Woah. Boyfriend?

I shake my head quickly and sit on the edge of the bed. The mugs are hot, and I hand Dare’s to him, then take a cautious sip from mine.

“Yeah,” I say. “You know, just half naked, making coffee in your house, and your dad comes in.”

Dare laughs. “Oh my god. What did he say?”

I recap the very uncomfortable conversation, and just as I finish, we hear his father call his name. My heart sinks, and Dare hangs his head, letting out a frustrated growl.

“I guess now is better than later,” he says, dragging himself out of bed. He quickly gets dressed in sweats and a T-shirt, and I put my coffee on the bedside table and pull on my shirt, too. He stops at the door, me right on his heels, and turns to me. “You don’t have to do this,” he says seriously.

“If you have to face him, I’m coming along. We’re in this together, little lycan.”

The smile that spreads across his face is worth every awkward, uncomfortable, ridiculous moment that has transpired. Dare opens his door and leads the way downstairs. His father is sitting in the living room, his own cup of coffee in his hand. His ankle is crossed over his knee, and he’s looking between the two of us.

“Good morning, boys.”

I can’t tell if his tone is teasing or scolding. Maybe a little of both. I nod at him, and Dare rounds to the back of the couch. I join him.

“Hi, Dad. Didn’t know you were coming by today,” he says, a clear tension in his voice.

Without hesitation, I reach out and press my hand to his lower back. My thumb starts moving up and down involuntarily. Mr. Archer looks between the two of us again and clears his throat.

Dare doesn’t give him a second to say anything else. “Dad, you remember Lev Richardson, right?”

Dare’s dad answers, his face emotionless. “You’ll excuse me if I didn’t recognize you immediately. It’s been quite a while since we’ve seen you, Lev.”

I take my hand off Dare’s back and grip the back of my neck. “Yes, sir. I’ve been away. Just came back a few weeks ago.”

“We’re seeing each other, Dad.” Dare blurts it out, and his dad winces.

Mr. Archer takes a sip of his coffee. “I figured as much,” he says. “Don’t you think it’s a bit odd that you’re—”

“No,” Dare cuts in. “Nope. We’re not doing this. Lev and I are adults, and what we choose to do is on us. You’re never here, and had I known you were coming home this morning, we would have met at his place. You don’t get to tell me what company to keep.”

My eyes shoot to Dare, pride swelling in my chest at how he’s handling this.

“I-I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Mr. Archer,” I manage.

His dad looks at Dare. “I would just like to ask that you give me the courtesy to let me know when you’re having company so that I don’t, you know, walk into someone in my house that isn’t you.”

Dare pinches his nose. “I live here by myself ninety-five percent of the time, Dad. I think that *I* would like the courtesy of knowing when *you* are coming so that *I* can plan accordingly.”

His father doesn’t know what to say to that, so he sits quietly. The air in the room is thick, and my eyes are trained on the coffee table in the middle of the floor. Mr. Archer takes another sip of his coffee and stands.

“Until we sell, this house still belongs to your mother and me. You live here, but it’s our home.”

Dare scoffs.

“I came to exchange some things,” his dad continues. “I have a business deal, and I’ll be spending the time in Dallas. I won’t be home until after Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, this year—”

“Unfortunately,” Dare interrupts, “this year, you’ll be out of town on business, and it couldn’t be avoided. Did I remember that right from last year?”

Mr. Archer’s face flares with anger, and he lets out a short huff of frustration. “I don’t appreciate your attitude, Darian.”

Dare shrugs like he couldn’t care less, but I can almost sense the fact that he’s trying to hold back tears.

“Have a safe trip, Dad,” Dare says in a clipped tone before he turns to head upstairs.

All I can think to do is give Mr. Richardson an awkward wave and hurry after Dare.

“Nice to see you again, Lev,” Mr. Richardson says as I jog up the stairs.

Dare is just trudging through the door to his bedroom when I reach the top of the stairs, his shoulders slumped and full of tension. I realize then that this is what Dare has been going through and handling for the last few years, and my stomach sinks as I close and lock the door to his bedroom behind us.

Ahead of me, Dare flops down on his bed. I follow, sitting on the edge and looking at him. I try to steady his breath by putting my hand on his chest.

"That was fucking weird," I say after a moment, and we both start to laugh, some of the tension lessening. I'm about to tell him that I really want him to come to my parents' house and have Thanksgiving with us—no way am I letting him be here alone—but then he reaches for my hand and looks up at me.

"Did you miss dear ol' dad?" His voice is dripping with sarcasm, but he continues to giggle.

"What?" I ask, pushing him on the shoulder lightly.

"I just . . . the thought of my dad walking in on some guy, shirtless, using his coffee pot. I wish I had been there to see his face."

I laugh. "Yeah, I think I was just as shocked."

"*That* would have been just as funny to see."

"Jerk," I tell him. I push him back down on the bed, lean over, and kiss him.

When we pull back a few minutes later, I'm holding Dare against my chest, and he sighs and rests his head on me.

"It's fine, really," Dare says. "We haven't had a proper Thanksgiving—hell, a proper holiday—since Nate died. I usually eat frozen pizza. One year I made a pretend Thanksgiving meal with chicken nuggets, boxed stuffing, and instant mashed potatoes. I ate it while I watched *The Departed*. I got drunk and passed out by 7 pm."

"I'll let my mom know that you're coming for Thanksgiving," I state, leaving him no room to argue.

He gives me a crooked smile and nods, but I see the tears in his eyes. It breaks my heart, and I lean down and kiss him softly, running my hand through his hair.

"I'm really fucking gone for you, lycan."

He reaches around and hugs me to him, kissing me back in a way that tells me he feels exactly the same.

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Chapter 47

Darian

Now that Lev and I are together again, a lightness that I haven't felt in years has come back to me, and it's like I'm able to breathe.

I didn't do much work over the whole week that I was trying to figure things out, so I have some things to catch up on. I take some time to answer emails, bid on a few contracts, and work on some things that were past due for some clients. I feel really good by the time evening rolls around the next day.

My dad left later that same day he ran into Lev in the kitchen, and we didn't really have much to say to one another. It did help to push me toward something I've been thinking a lot about lately—buying the house.

Now that Lev has stayed the night here, I wonder what his thoughts would be on this. I can't believe that I'm thinking about pulling Lev into this decision. We've just started seeing each other, but after the other night, I know he feels the things that I feel, too. This is real. This relationship that we have, these feelings, they're real. It's more than just sex and some petty crush. He makes me feel cared for, cherished, and alive. I want more.

I start doing some research on what it would take to buy my parents out of the house, and once I get everything in order, I'll bring it up to Lev first. Given his reaction, I'll talk to my parents after that. We have some time, since my mom said they aren't going to sell before the new year rolls around.

I'd like nothing more than to keep this house and all its memories and add Lev to it. I'm not naïve, and I realize this could be a big ask of him, especially since he said he wasn't really comfortable coming over. But after he spent the night, he seemed more at ease here. Maybe he'll consider it.

Thinking about Lev makes me want to see him. I know he should be home from the shop by now, so I send him a text.

Me: Hey.

It only takes a minute or two before I get a response.

Lev: Hey yourself. What's up?

Me: I want to see you. Let's go out.

The three dots move a few times.

Lev: Okay. Where?

Me: Doesn't matter.

Lev: Sure! Want me to come pick you up?

Me: Can you?

Lev: Yeah. Give me half an hour.

Me: Sounds good. See you then.

Lev: Is your dad there? *wink emoji*

I laugh out loud.

Me: Nope. It's just me. You're safe.

Lev: Whew. See you then.

I smile and set my phone down, then take a quick shower. I'm not sure what we're going to do, but I don't care. I just want to see him and be near him. I want to touch him and talk to him. I need to be in his presence.

God, I really am as gone for this guy as he said he was for me two nights ago. I just hope he's as serious as I am. My heart couldn't handle losing him now.

Lev picks me up almost exactly thirty minutes after our last text. He comes to the door to get me, knocking just as I'm opening it with a smile. He greets me and then grabs my neck and pulls me in for a searing kiss. My knees go weak as I kiss him back, my fingers tracing the edge of his jeans. When we pull away, he gives me a smile.

"Hey," he says.

I shut and lock the door behind me. "Hey yourself."

He takes my hand and walks me toward the car. Once we're inside, he starts the engine, cranks up the heater, and clicks on the seat warmers, then turns to me. "What do you want to do?" he asks.

It's about seven thirty, and the sun has already set to darkness. I have no ideas, and so I just shrug. "Nothing special. I just wanted to hang."

He smiles that beautiful smile, and I grin back, reaching up to put my pointer finger in his dimple. I can't help it. He laughs as he grabs my finger and then kisses the pad of it. My heart flutters, and a feeling of peace settles over me.

"Let's just drive, then?" he says. When I nod in response, he lets go of my hand, reverses out of the driveway, and heads out of the neighborhood.

"How did things end up going with your annoying customer?" I ask him, referencing a text he sent me earlier in the day.

"Oh, man. Let's just say I was happy when he was gone. What about you? Get that bid for the school district logo revamp in?"

"I DID!" I exclaim. "I like what I have."

"Who were they? I mean, what was the mascot?"

"The Porcupines. I shit you not."

We both let out huge belly laughs.

"I pity the fool who has to wear that mascot suit," he says, still laughing.

We continue to drive. I'm not sure where we're going, but I don't ask. I don't even know that he knows at this point. We put some music on, and Lev reaches over and rests his hand on my thigh. I lean my head back on the

headrest and take a deep breath. It's fun just being with him. While we drive, we talk. Other times we're silent, and occasionally we sing along to the lyrics.

It's so normal, and it feels so right.

I decide it's now or never.

"Lev," I say quietly.

"Hmmmm?" he asks, letting go of my thigh and gripping my hand.

I take a deep breath. "So, are we boyfriends?"

The way I say it makes him laugh.

"Is that what you want, Dare?" He turns to look at me, and I nod. He smiles softly and says, "I would love nothing more than for you to be my boyfriend."

I feel like I'm going to soar right out of my seat. "I really want to be your boyfriend. I want us together officially, Lev."

"I want that too," he agrees. He squeezes my hand and then kisses my knuckles, and my heart melts.

About an hour after we started driving, Lev pulls off the main road and navigates through a few back roads. The roads get more narrow and less traveled as we go.

Curiosity finally gets the best of me, and I ask, "Where are we going?"

He smirks. "Just a little place I know, boyfriend."

I can't help smiling or the flip-flop of my stomach, but I sit back, trusting that whatever he has planned will be great. We drive farther down the one-lane road into nothingness, and after we cross over to a dirt road, he slows the car. A few deer run across in front of us, and I jump.

"What's the matter, lycan? Wolves aren't afraid of deer."

I chuckle, but I'm still unsettled. They spooked me.

He pulls the car through a bunch of trees, into a clearing, then cuts the headlights. The only light is the interior of the dashboard, glowing in a bluish-purple color.

"Where are we?" I ask.

"We used to come here a lot back in the day. We'd come out here to party."

I suck in a breath as realization hits me. "Wait!" I turn toward Lev. "Is this . . . This is the secret place you guys used to always come to! The one that you would pretend wasn't real but would *always* tease me about!"

Lev smiles.

"This is *it*! I *knew* this was a place. I *knew* you guys had a place that you came to hang, and I was always so jealous because I knew it would be super cool. Wait, you brought me here?"

Lev laughs. "This is exciting for you, huh?" he teases.

“I mean, I just . . . I knew that there was somewhere you would go, and it used to piss me off so much because I never knew where it was. You guys kept this locked up tight.”

“Very few people know about it, and it’s super private.” Lev lets go of my hand and traces circles on my thigh. My heart rate speeds up a little. “It’s *really* private,” he says again, a tease in his tone.

That’s all it takes. “Push your chair back,” I command, and he gives a low chuckle.

“Just what I was hoping for,” he says, as I maneuver myself to straddle him in the driver’s seat. It’s awkward and cramped, but he manages to get the seat back as far as he can go, reclining it to give us a little more room.

As soon as we’re settled, my mouth crashes down on Lev’s, and we’re a tangle of lips and teeth and tongues. I’m instantly turned on, and I grind against him, feeling his cock start to swell in his pants, too. We’re both breathing heavily as the kisses deepen, and our hands move to explore as much as they can. Mine find Lev’s head, and I tilt his face so I can devour his mouth. His hands slide up under my shirt and jacket, which is just in the way at this point, so I lean forward and try to take it off. We laugh as he helps me. It’s comical, really—two adult men in the front seat of a car.

We kiss more, deeper, and I rock down into him, needing more pressure and friction. He groans, which doesn’t help.

“Take your shirt off,” I say against his lips, and he listens immediately. I straighten up with him to pull it off over his head. Then our lips meet again.

I scoot my ass back as far as I can so I can reach his pants. My butt hits the car horn, and it blasts out into the silent darkness. Lev snickers, and I snort a laugh, then he lets go of my body and wiggles out of his pants. Thank god he was wearing sweatpants, and they come off easily.

His dick springs out and falls against his abs, thick and hard and looking positively delicious. I whimper at the sight, taking it in my hand and stroking it a few times. Lev hisses and reaches for my belt and button. I let go of him and sit up just long enough to get my pants off. It’s a little more difficult than his were, but we manage without too much trouble or any more honking of the horn.

Once we’re both naked, our bodies collide again, his mouth finding mine and his hands sliding up and down my back greedily. He’s needy, and I love it.

“Glove box,” he says against my lips.

It takes a minute for my brain to comprehend, and when I finally realize what he meant, I lean back so he can sit up and reach over. He pops the glove compartment open, and the little light inside comes on. There are some condoms and a small bottle of lube, and I shake my head, laughing.

"You always this prepared, MacGyver?"

Lev snickers and slams the glove box shut. "Only when I know there's a chance."

I catch him winking at me, and then he's slicking up his fingers and reaching around my back to touch my hole. I moan and push down on him immediately.

"Always so willing," he teases, slipping a finger inside me. We both groan simultaneously at the feeling. It doesn't take long for him to prep me this time, and before I know it, he's sliding the condom on. He strokes himself a few times with his slick fingers, lubing up the condom. "Sit on me," he demands.

I willingly comply.

Sliding Lev inside me makes me break out in a light, dewy sweat and goose bumps at the same time. He feels so thick at this angle and so fucking good that my eyes roll back in my head.

"Goddamn," I sigh. "You're so fucking big."

Lev moans softly and pulls me down for a kiss. "Ride me," he says against my lips, and I'm happy to.

I start to lift and lower myself on his shaft, my dick leaking precum all over Lev's stomach. Lev moans, and his hands slide down to my ass cheeks and help me lift and lower. Fuck, that feels good.

I ride him harder.

"Fuck, Dare." He groans and throws his head back against the headrest. "I'm not going to last much longer, baby," he says, and I shiver at the nickname. "Fuck me." It's a command, and boy, it does something to me.

My heart slams into my ribcage as I move faster and grind deeper, and when Lev's dick slides across my prostate, my eyes go crossed.

"Ohfuck. Ohfuck. Ohfuck. Lev," I say in time to my grinding. "I'm gonna come. I'm gonna . . ." I tense, and my hands clamp down onto Lev's shoulders as I explode. He follows right after me with a grunt and several short, quick thrusts, his breathing heavy and his hands digging into my sides.

"Fucking FUCK," he says, and then he leans forward and captures my lips with his.

I laugh against him and kiss him back before flipping my right leg around and falling awkwardly into the passenger seat. We're both breathing hard, and the windows are all fogged up. It's the most perfect thing in the world.

"There are wet wipes in the glove box," he tells me, and I manage not to tease him about being prepared with that, too, as I reach for some. Lev pinches his softening dick at the top and expertly pulls the condom off, then ties it and wraps it in a wet wipe. He takes a few from me to clean up my jizz from his chest, and I see him wiping his neck and cheek.

"Did I shoot that far?" I ask, and he nods. "Sorry," I say with a chuckle.

He just smiles. "I loved it all," he answers, handing the wet wipes back to me.

I put them away, and he reaches out an arm.

"Not sure how much we can cuddle over the console, but . . ."

I hear him, but it doesn't register because like a child, I'm writing on the window.

With a defeated-sounding sigh, he asks, "What did you write?"

It's like he knows it's something that shouldn't be on his window.

Grinning stupidly, I take my phone out of the cup holder and shine the flashlight for him to see.

WE JUST FUCKED is written in messy print on the steamed-up window.

"Jesus, Dare," Lev huffs, shaking his head. "You know that's going to show every time the window fogs now."

I shrug, and we both laugh again. Then, after we take a few minutes to get dressed, Lev opens his arm and pulls me over to him. My hand rests on his stomach, and we cuddle for a few minutes. The car smells like sex, and we're both still sweaty, but I'm also completely at peace right now.

When Lev's heart rate starts to even out, he presses a few sweet kisses to my head. Then he yawns.

I sit up, planting a kiss on his cheek. "I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

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Chapter 48

Levon

Later that week, I call my mom. She's elated when I ask if Dare can join us for Thanksgiving. Of course, telling her that I want to have him come for Thanksgiving dinner also means that I have to fully admit to her that we're together. She's completely unfazed and happy for us and says she's looking forward to getting to know him better.

She was not naïve to the stuff that happened with his family after Nate. Even after I left, Lindsey would apparently fill her in on things going on with Dare and the Archers before she would tell me. So my mom is more than happy to have him over, and I think she understands just how much it will mean to him to not be alone on the holiday.

As I hang up with her and then sit back down to grab some lunch, my phone goes off. It's a text from Caleb, telling me that the Pack is all going to be at the Exchange the night before Thanksgiving. He says he just wanted to let me know, and at the end of the text, he tells me to bring Dare, followed by the Kathryn Hahn wink gif. I smile and pocket my phone,

figuring that Dare has plans to go already and we just haven't talked about it yet.

The rest of the day goes by quickly, and after work, I find myself on the way to Dare's. Being and staying at the house has gotten a bit easier. The other night, we went to the basement to hang out and watch a movie, and it was tough, but being there with him softened the pain of reliving my memories of Nate. We had a good laugh about the time that I walked downstairs and caught him experimenting with his friend. I was right when I thought that was what I walked in on.

When I get to Dare's house, he comes outside to greet me. We meet with a fevered kiss, Dare thrusting his tongue into my mouth and holding me tightly.

"Mmmm," he moans. "I missed you."

"It's only been two days, little lycan," I tease him, nipping at his lip ring with my teeth.

He smiles into my mouth. "That's one day too long," he says.

He takes my hand and leads me into the house. A pizza is already sitting on the counter, and we plate some up and take our seats at the table.

Conversation flows freely between the two of us, and we talk about our plans for Wednesday night. Dare tells me that he already expected us to go and that Ryan and Katie are going to be there, along with a bunch of his other friends.

I swallow my bite of pizza and say, "Will you go with me? Officially?"

He bats his eyelashes at me. "You mean like . . . a *date*?" He's grinning at me while he wipes his mouth with a napkin.

"Yes, Dare. Another date."

He laughs and accepts, of course.

After dinner, Darian grabs his keys and turns to me. "I want to go to the inlet," he tells me, and my heart stops. He must see the dread on my face, because he continues quickly. "I go sometimes when I need to be close to him or when I need to talk to him. I want us to go together. I want you to be with me this time." His green eyes are wide and pleading.

I haven't been to the inlet since the day that the town did the official dedication in Nate's memory. I never went back because it was too much of a reminder of what happened.

I swallow hard and nod. "Okay," I manage.

Dare smiles at me, and I follow him out of the house and to his car.

The drive to the inlet doesn't take long, proving just how close to home Nate actually was that night. It's quiet for a few minutes, both of us just absorbing where we are and the significance of it. Dare reaches for my hand, and our fingers slide together. He takes a deep breath.

"I come here and talk to him sometimes. Is that weird?"

I put my head back against the headrest. "Not weird at all."

We sit in silence for a few more minutes, and my gut feels like it's eating me from the inside out. I have to tell Dare about that night. I have to tell him what happened the night of the party and why I wasn't with Nate. I've been holding onto these words for a long time, but I'm not entirely sure whether my need to share this with Dare is because *I* want to feel better or if it's something that will help us in the long run.

It's probably a little bit of both.

What I have to say isn't really going to help him in any way, but I hate having this hanging between us—a secret I haven't shared with him. He could truly hate me after this. After spending so much time with him lately, I've realized how much my leaving hurt him, and this could be another hole that he falls into.

But it's a hole I'm *still* trying to dig myself out of, too. I spent a lot of time in the dark, drinking and trying to get the voices out of my head. They haunted me all the time. And as much as I tried, I couldn't fill the Nate-sized hole in my life. Once I left and got to Sheltonville, I worked really hard to fix my thoughts and get rid of the blame that I carried with me about That Night. Every time I felt like I was making progress, I would slip back and replay the moment my parents knocked on my door to tell me what happened. I spent a lot of nights on the phone with my mom, crying or sometimes just sitting in silence.

I've been over it all so many times in my head, but I need to say it all to Dare. I need to let him know so I can move forward and so we can go into this relationship with no secrets.

If he hates me and wants to end it after I tell him, I'll understand why. I stall for a few more minutes because I want to be sure that this is right and that I can muster up the words.

Then, finally, I squeeze his hand and take a deep shaky breath, staring out at the darkness as I talk. "I wasn't with him that night," I say quietly.

Dare squeezes my hand back but says nothing.

I take another deep breath and close my eyes tightly. “I blame myself constantly. I was being stupid that night and was more interested in a hookup than in my friends.”

I feel his grip lighten in my hand, and my heart tumbles. Even though it’s dark, I turn to face him. “The other guys were at the party at Caleb’s house. I stopped by, but . . . I had been talking to this guy. He . . . we . . . it would have been my first real experience, you know?” I go on without pausing. “So I thought that, I, um, I wanted to meet up with him—a stranger—more than I wanted to be there for Nate.” The last words catch in my throat, and I hear Dare suck in a breath.

“Lev,” he whispers.

Tears fill my eyes, and one rolls down my cheek. “I’m so sorry, Dare. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Lev,” he says again. “It’s not your fault that he died.” He lets go of my hand and runs his fingers through his hair. “It’s not your fault.” We sit in silence for a few minutes before he says, “Jesus, Lev. It’s not your fucking fault.”

“I’m so fucking sorry, Dare.”

A sob leaves my throat, and Dare is on me before I can breathe again. He clumsily tries to crawl over me like he did in my car the other night. It’s awkward because it was unexpected, and I laugh at the same time that I huff out another sob. He settles against me and hugs me tightly, kissing my cheeks and using his lips to clean up the tears falling down my cheeks.

“Lev. Please.” *Kiss. Kiss.* “It’s not your fault.” *Kiss*.

I pull him closer to me.

“He chose to drive, Lev. Nate did this to himself. *No one* is responsible for this but him.” *Kiss*.

“But if I was at the party, I would have stopped—”

Dare interrupts me. “Stop. Please. Just stop.” His voice has a bit of a desperation to it. “You did not do this. Please, Lev.” He’s holding my face between his palms, thumbs tracing my cheekbones back and forth like little fleshy windshield wipers. He lightly kisses my lips. “He did this, Lev. Not you. *Nate* did this.”

I don’t know what to say to this amazing, beautiful man. I know how his heart broke and how his life changed. It impacted us all. I can’t help that I feel like I’m responsible, but his brother is sitting here, telling me that I’m okay. That everything that happened was not on me. I’m in awe of his

strength and his forgiveness. It's such a relief to know that he doesn't blame me.

Nate was an amazing guy. He was special, and now it's almost like I can feel him channeling the message Dare is telling me. That it's not anyone's fault and that I need to stop continually beating myself up over the guilt.

"No one blames you. No one. You have to let that go. Please let that go," Dare insists. I take in a deep breath as he says, "Lev."

He levels us so our eyes are lined up, and he stares into mine. The dashboard light casts shadows on his face, making him glow. I could stare at him forever. I want to pull his pain and make it mine, yet here he is, trying to bring *me* peace and calm through this entire mess.

"You have to let this go," he repeats.

He releases my face and hugs me tightly for as long as it takes me to calm down. I get a few deep breaths in, and the vise on my heart starts to loosen. He rolls off of me and back into the driver's seat, hugging his knees to his chest and resting his chin on them.

"Tell me you'll let it go."

I'm so choked up that I can't answer him right now, so I just nod.

Dare kisses me lightly and then pulls me in for another hug.

When I find my voice again, I say, "Thank you, Dare."

We sit in silence for a bit longer before Darian turns on some music. I lean my head back and close my eyes, letting the presence of Darian Archer fill up the cracks that have been breaking my heart for the last eight years. And maybe that's exactly what I need so everything doesn't feel so excruciatingly painful anymore.

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Chapter 49

Darian

"I think I might offer to buy my house," I announce to Lev.

We're lying in Lev's bed, awake and talking. Lev is on his back, and I'm currently lying on top of him, our arms spread out and our fingers linked. I'm pressed against him as close as I can possibly be and reveling in the warmth of our closeness and touch. My chest and stomach are tight against his, matching up as close as we can, given our slight height difference, and our legs alternate—his, mine, his, mine. I'm getting my fill of just being close to him.

It's Thanksgiving morning, and it's the first time in years that I've had something to look forward to about the holiday. Sure, I'm a little bit nervous going to Lev's parents' house and sitting around their table, making small talk. But I'm just happy to know I'll be spending the day with him and the important people in his life.

Propping my chin on his chest, I raise my eyes to him. His eyebrows are arched up, and his hands leave mine, wrapping around my back and then rubbing up and down my spine.

“Yeah?” he says, searching my face. “Why? Where did that come from?”

I shrug and scoot my face down so my cheek is against his chest. “I don’t know. I just . . . My parents want to sell it, and I don’t want to leave. I figured if I could get a few contracts, and maybe the one that Julian is talking to me about, then I can afford the house. I have the money in savings that they gave me, and I could essentially just buy it from them.”

I can hear his heart beating and feel his chest move up and down as we lie here. He stays silent, so I continue.

“You know that I love it there, Lev. It’s my home, and the memories . . .” I trail off, having said all I needed to say. Then I shrug and change the topic, since I’ve obviously made him uncomfortable. “At the bonfire, you know Lindsey’s boyfriend was talking to me about plans for his business. I told him what I did, and he said he had a lot of ideas for work coming up and wanted to see my portfolio. I sent it to him the other day, and we’ve been casually talking since. If I could work something out with him, it would be huge for me.”

“Wait, you sent Julian your portfolio?” Lev’s lips press into the top of my head. “You’re serious, huh? Well, if that’s what you want and that’s what you can do, then do it!”

I sigh. “I don’t know, Julian was talking about it only being a contract—a 1099 for now—but he said that he has some major plans, and if the company grows, he could bring me on more permanently. That would be so cool. It would be nice to have some stability.” Steeling myself against whatever reaction he might have, I circle back. “And that would help if I were to buy the house. I . . . I just can’t bring myself to leave that all behind, you know? So much has happened there, and it’s got a lot of space . . . and the pool.”

Lev chuckles. “Oh yes. The pool.”

I laugh softly with him, nuzzling my face into his chest. “Another conversation for another time,” I say.

“You brought it up,” he teases, poking my side.

I shove off of him with a squeal and then stick out my lip in a pout because we aren’t lying together anymore. He stretches up and kisses my pouty lip, sucking it into his mouth and biting it. I exhale a little moan and give in, letting him kiss me again. Before we get too heated, he pulls away. I try to chase his kiss, but he’s up and out of the bed already. I groan and flop back down.

“Come on, lycan. Mom will be waiting.” He extends his hand to me and pulls me up.

We get dressed, Lev in a pair of lighter-wash jeans that I’m used to seeing and a white T-shirt with a brown-and-yellow flannel over top. The flannel unfortunately covers his two nearly full sleeves of ink—gothic designs and motorcycle parts running up and down his arms that I have discovered over the last few months—and I find myself wishing it was warmer so they were exposed instead. He’s so freakin’ fine.

When we get to the Richardsons’ house, there are already a few cars in the driveway, and my nerves hit me head-on. I clear my throat, and Lev looks at me, taking my hand over the console of the car.

“You okay?” he asks, squeezing my hand.

I nod. “I was, but now I’m kind of nervous.”

He reaches out to touch my face and rubs my cheek with his knuckles. “You’ll be fine. I promise,” he says softly. “I love you, so they’ll love you.”

He freezes, his bright-blue eyes wide. I can’t help the smile that creeps onto my lips, but Lev doesn’t give me a chance to respond. His hand is off of my face, and he’s out of the car in no time.

He just . . . Did he . . . Yep, he did. I smirk as I get out of the passenger side and straighten my leather jacket. *He just told me he loves me.*

I feel like I’m floating when Lev grabs my hand. He’s tense, but he walks us to the door. I give his hand a squeeze and smile at him. Knocking once, he pushes the door open, and we’re met with the most aromatic scents of turkey, spices, and pie. The house has a warmth that envelopes both of us as we move farther into the entryway. I push the door shut behind me as Lev yells out, “Hellllloooooooo!”

We hear a clinking in the kitchen, and then Mrs. Richardson comes out of the room ahead of us, wiping her hands on a flowy apron.

“Hello, boys!” she exclaims, grabbing Lev and wrapping him in a hug.

“Hi, Mom,” he says, pulling away and reaching for me. “Mom, this is—”

His mom’s face lights up as she comes to me, arms open, and then she envelops me up in them when she gets to me.

“Darian Archer, welcome! It’s so good to see you. We’re so glad you could come!” She pulls off of me and runs her hand down my arm, looking me up and down. Then she turns to Lev. “My, my. What a handsome man he has grown into.” She swats his arm as his face starts to redden. It’s adorable.

Lindsey and Julian come down the stairs, and as soon as Lindsey sees Lev, she squeals and barrels into him, her arms wrapping around him. I shake hands with Julian and greet Lindsey, and then Lev's mom tells us to get drinks and go join Mr. Richardson in the living room. Lindsey starts talking to me, leading me into the room as Lev and Julian head to the kitchen.

When we get to the living room, Lindsey stops with me. Lev's dad and the guy from the motorcycle shop look up at us from where they were watching football on TV.

"Dad? Uncle John?" Lindsey motions to me. "This is Dare. Darian Archer. He's here with Lev today."

They both greet us, and I feel Lev's warmth press against me from behind. He leans in and kisses my neck as he offers me a bottle.

My cheeks heat up with embarrassment. "Thank you," I mumble, taking the beer. He hums against my neck, then leads me to the couch, and we join everyone hanging out in the room.

Lev makes himself comfortable, his hand on my knee as we settle into the cushions. The touch is exactly what I need right now, and something content and warm fills my chest as I realize he knows that. And he cares. God, he does love me. I still can't believe he told me that not more than five minutes ago. I sigh happily, though I'm trying not to be too outwardly giddy.

His dad starts talking to us, asking questions and inquiring about my parents and what they're doing, how they are, typical small talk. I don't have much to tell them, but I fill them in on what I know, trying to keep the disdain out of my voice. Lev gives my knee a little squeeze in an effort to comfort me.

Lindsey and Mr. Richardson keep asking Mrs. Richardson if she needs help. She says she's fine, and her sister-in-law (Aunt Tracy, whom I also met) is helping her in the kitchen. Occasionally, Lev will get up to go help her for a bit as well. Even I offered to help at one point.

"Oh, aren't you sweet?" she said in response. "I'm doing well. Please go enjoy. There's not a lot more to do anyway!"

So, I went and sat back down with Lev, and I've been here ever since. It's perfect here anyway, I think, as I look around. It's just what I thought it would be, just what it should be.

Drinks are replenished, conversation is boisterous, and it just feels so right, especially when Lev slips his arm up and around my shoulders.

Around four o'clock, Lindsey pokes her head in from the kitchen and yells "Dinner is served!" Everyone laughs because she used a French accent.

We file into the dining room and find seats. The table is set for eight, and we all sit next to our partners, with Mr. Richardson at the head of the table. It's all so family-oriented and special that I feel a little bit overwhelmed.

We eat our weight in food and dessert, and there's rarely a lull in the conversation. Lev's family does extremely well at including Julian and me in the conversation, filling us in on jokes and backstories and asking us questions to keep us engaged.

After the dishes are cleared and our drinks are refilled, Lindsey pulls out a deck of cards. "It's time for some spades!" she announces, dealing everyone in. We play a game of spades, followed by some rummy. It's so natural.

I find myself overcome with emotion again as I realize my parents haven't even sent me a text message to check in or wish me a happy Thanksgiving. Lev must see the change, because his hand finds my thigh.

"You okay, little lycan?" he whispers.

I look at him, and my eyes fill with tears.

"I'm good," I say, swallowing as I reach my hand under the table and lace our fingers together.

He cocks his head, concern flooding his piercing blue eyes.

"Really, Lev. I'm good," I assure him.

He pushes his chair back and pulls me up. "Come on. Let's go outside for a minute."

Lev leads me outside for some cool air. Pressing me up against the corner of the deck, which I'm hoping is out of view of the dining room, Lev cages me in with his arms on either side of my body.

"Hey," he says quietly, pressing his groin against me.

I shiver, not sure if it's from the cold air or him. "Hey yourself," I respond, rising slightly to meet his lips in a soft kiss that quickly turns fevered.

When we pull away, Lev's forehead rests on mine. "You sure you're okay?" he asks.

“Mm-hmm,” I say, wrapping my arms around his waist and pulling him in. I fit perfectly in the V-shape of the deck’s corner with Lev’s large frame enveloping me, making it a tight fit that I don’t mind at all. “I’m good. Thank you for letting me share your family tonight,” I say to him.

He hugs me back. “They like you,” he says. “I can tell.”

“What’s not to like?” I tease, giving my hips a little shimmy against him.

He growls deep in his chest. “Exactly,” he says, nipping my ear lobe. I gasp. “I want to get you home,” he says.

I nod against him. There’s still a bit of conversation we need to have. A warmth fills my body at the words that tumbled out of Lev before we got to his front door, and I smile to myself.

“Come on.” He takes my hand, kissing me quickly. “Let’s say good night.”

We head back into the house and find everyone in the kitchen. Lev walks up to his mom first and gives her a hug.

“We’re going to get out of here, Mom.”

Her eyes crinkle with the warmth of her smile. “Thank you both for coming,” she says, hugging Lev and then me. “Please come back *any* time, Darian.”

The way she says it isn’t in the normal way that other people say it. Her tone is genuine, not pitying. It warms me from the inside. We say goodbye and thank you to everyone else and after Lev’s mom inundates us with too many containers of leftovers, we clamor out to Lev’s car and make the short drive to his apartment. I know no one is home at my house tonight, but I want to stay at Lev’s anyway. Given the day we had, I really want to be in his arms and in his bed.

I got to see a side of life today that I never thought I would be a part of. Sure, I’ve always kind of wanted to eventually get married and maybe even have kids, but I never pictured that it might be with Lev. Spending a holiday with his family and seeing all of them and how they interact, the ease of their conversations and playful banter was so refreshing and fun. The fact that they brought me into the family with no questions or hesitation or concerns was also just . . . nice.

The thought that this—holidays, picnics, or even just family dinners with the Richardsons—might be something I could have more of settles an ache deep inside of me, and I imagine the future for a moment. Us having dinner

with his parents and sister and then coming home to *our* house. The thought warms me from head to toe.

Lev wraps his arms around me, and I lean against his chest as we make ourselves comfortable for the night. Once we're both settled, I tilt my head back to look up at Lev and begin tracing his jawline with open-mouthed kisses. He hums and lets his head fall sideways, giving me more room. I move to his neck and then back to his chin, and when I find his lips again, he meets me in a fervent kiss.

We pull away a moment later, both breathing heavily, and I gaze at him. This man loves me. And he said it first. My heart swells as I look at him.

"Lev," I murmur.

"Hmm?" he asks quietly.

"I love you, too."

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Chapter 50

Levon

The day after Thanksgiving, Dare and I stay in bed making out, snuggling, and trading orgasms for the majority of the morning. We may or may not say “I love you” about a thousand times, and I don’t know that I will ever get tired of hearing those words coming out of his mouth. I hadn’t really planned to say it to him in the car at my parents’ house. Well, maybe I had meant to, but in the moment, it slipped out, and I just went with it. My feelings for him are strong, and I guess it was just time to share that with him.

Thanksgiving with my family was great, made all the better with Dare by my side. I saw him get reserved and pull into himself a few times, and I know he was thinking about his parents. How parents could just abandon their children like his did makes me angry and very confused. I want Dare to have it all. He deserves it all, and I know my family will easily allow him to integrate in and be part of us. He just has to let us and believe that he deserves it.

Around lunchtime, we force ourselves to get out of bed and shower, cleaning ourselves up and washing all the cum and sweat off of our bodies. We eat some leftovers and hang out a bit more before Dare decides to go

home. We both have to work the next day, and although I tried to get him to just grab his laptop and work here, he informed me that he needs his setup the way it is at home and that I would be too much of a distraction. He's probably not wrong.

Given that Julian said he liked Dare's portfolio and wants to set up an interview with him, I know he's got a lot of work to do. He was so excited about it, and I know he likes the idea that he might have a steady stream of income coming in.

Which is why he's also seriously considering buying the house from his parents.

When he told me that yesterday, I was surprised, but it all makes sense to me, why he would want to do that. Now that I've spent some time over there, it's not as bad being there as I thought it would be, except when you count his father walking in on me in the kitchen.

Before I go to bed for the night, I text Dare.

Me: Night Lycan. I'm going to bed. I love you.

Lycan: Night, yourself. Ryan asked me to go out for a while. Heading out soon.

I chuckle and shake my head.

Me: Be careful, please.

Lycan: I will.

Me: I love you.

Lycan: I'm smiling and I love you too, Lev.

I have a huge smile on my face as I roll over and go to sleep.

***

The ringing and buzzing of my phone wakes me out of a deep sleep. My bed is empty, and the room is dark. I am disoriented as I come to my senses. I roll over and pull the covers up, only to hear the noise of my phone again.

Groaning, I reach behind me and bring the bright screen to my tired eyes. Squinting, I notice that I have multiple missed calls and texts, all from the tag *Little Lycan*.

My heart shoots into my throat as I sit up, now wide awake.

There's a tremble to my hands as I check the time. They started around 1:00 a.m., and it's now 2:24 a.m. My fingers fumble with the phone, and I have to pick it up again.

"Shit!" I groan. I finally manage to get it unlocked and see the screen.

I grab the texts first. The first text is a picture of Dare and Ryan, tapping beer bottles together smiling at the camera. The second text is Dare and Ryan with another guy I recognize from the bonfire. They are sitting on the love seat, and Dare is squeezed between the two, half on Ryan and half on the floor. His hair is disheveled, and he looks like he's having a good time.

The next few texts seem to be photos of a play-by-play of the night and the various stages of intoxication. One is Ryan and Dare again, their eyes half closed, signaling that they're drunk. Another is Ryan and Dare with a different friend, who's kissing Dare on the cheek. My lycan is beaming from ear to ear. The last one is Ryan and Dare again, giving each other the finger. I wish I could laugh, but I'm too concerned. My heart is still hammering when I decide to play the voice messages.

There's a lot of noise in the background, but I hear his voice clearly enough.

"Hi, Levvvvvv. You are shpecial, you knowthattt? You are sussha good guy. Whhyyyydo you lovvvve me?"

I hear another voice that sounds like Ryan's. "Dude, who are you calling? It's like one thirty in the morning! Ohhhhh, your BOYYYFRIEND." Laughter bursts out and the phone hangs up.

Next message. This one is whispered into the mouthpiece, but it's loud enough for me to hear. "Levvvvv. Ryan and I are drinking, and Lannnncess herrre. Idon wanna see Lance."

Silence.

Next message. Loud this time. "Hiiiii, Levvvvv. There're somemmmean guyssss here that keep messssing with me and Ry"—hiccup—"Ryan. I might havva fightem, okay?"

My heart rate picks up, and I see two more messages. My palms are sweating when the first one plays.

"Lev, it's Ryan, Dare's friend. Um, I'm not sure if you'll get this, but if you do, can you call back on Dare's phone? It's kind of urgent."

By this point, I'm out of bed and fumbling to get dressed. I throw on a pair of gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt, then grab a hoodie out of the closet. I pull some socks on my feet as I listen to the last message.

"Lev, it's Garrett." *Oh no.* "If you're not here in ten minutes, I'm calling the cops, and you can meet your boy at the station." Click.

FUCK.

I check the time and realize that message was the one that woke me up about ten minutes ago. Throwing my shoes on, I stumble out of the room and dial back Dare's number as I rush to the car, praying to whoever will listen that someone answers Dare's phone. It goes to voicemail.

SHIT!

I press the button to hang up the phone. Grappling with my phone and the car door, I search for Garrett's number and press call. I jump in the car and screech out of the lot, heading to the Exchange.

Garrett picks up. "Lev. Are you on your way?"

"Yeah," I answer. "I'll be there soon. What happened?" My heart is in my throat.

"Another freakin' fight, man. Your boy is unhinged. You need to come get his ass now."

"Is he okay?" I ask nervously.

"He'll be fine, but if you don't get here soon *I'm* going to kick his ass next."

Even with the tension on the line, I start to chuckle until I register that he said "next."

"Garre—"

"Just get here." The phone goes dead.

I let out an exasperated sigh and drop my phone on the passenger's seat. I know I'm going faster than I should be, but I have to get there. I need to get to Dare.

The thought rattles me, and it's then that I realize I also didn't put my seat belt on. My heart jumps in my chest. I slow down and snap my seat belt into place as I take several deep breaths, resetting myself.

I need to get there for Dare, yes, but I need to do it safely.

Traffic is light, which makes sense since it's two thirty in the morning, and even though I'm driving much slower than I was when I first left my apartment, I make it to the bar in record time, flying into the parking lot and throwing the car into park. I swear I get out as the car is still settling. I cross the lot with wide steps and then yank open the heavy, hard wooden door.

It’s quiet in the bar. There’s no music playing, and I see a small crowd of people in the back corner where the chairs and couches are. My eyes connect with Dare, who is sitting in one of the chairs, an ice pack on the side of his eye and a towel wrapped around his hand. I start to move forward when the door rips open behind me, and I spin around to see Katie barreling in.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” she says, freezing as she takes in the scene.

I chuckle at her response, and she flashes me a weary smile.

“Oh, hi, Lev. Good to see you again,” she says.

I nod in response, and she joins me as we walk over to the corner of the bar. Everyone over there looks a little worse for wear. Katie heads straight to Ryan, who’s sitting on the arm of a chair, also with an ice pack on his eye. His lip is bleeding, his hair is a mess, and his T-shirt is ripped.

Katie doesn’t sound amused when she says, “Come on. *Now*. We’re going home.” Ryan stands like a sad puppy and follows her out of my sight.

My eyes slide to Dare, sitting in the chair, head back. I walk over to him and shift so I’m standing between his legs. Our knees touch, and he slowly raises his head off the back of the chair.

“Hey,” I say quietly.

A sheepish grin spreads across his face. “Hey yourself,” he mumbles.

The side of his lip without the lip ring is swollen, and selfishly, I’m relieved it’s not the side with the lip ring.

I hear Garrett’s voice behind me and turn around. “Thanks for coming,” he says, patting me on the back. “This is it. Last warning. I’m not putting up with it again. Period. Get him out of here.”

“Thanks for calling,” I say, leaning down to tap Dare on the thigh. “Come on.”

He’s slow to rise but takes my hand and lets me lead him to the door. He stumbles a few times, likely just because he’s drunk. I don’t really know what to say to him at this point, and the fact that he’s still seemingly drunk tells me it’s probably not the best time to try to make sense of the night.

“Thanks for commming for me,” he slurs after we get settled in the car. “My eye hurrts.”

“Yeah,” I say incredulously. “Once I get you home, we’ll take a closer look.”

“Yernot mad?” He turns to look at me as I make my way out of the parking lot and onto the road headed toward my place.

“No, little lycan. I’m not mad. But we’ll talk more about it later, okay?” I put my hand on his thigh, and he sighs a huge, overly dramatic sigh.

He makes a very weak and very terrible attempt at a wolf howl, which has me chuckling.

“Idonn deserfe you,” he says, and this time, my heart cracks open a little bit. Then he starts belting out an Elton John song with words that match my name. He’s totally off key, and the words are out of order, but he’s adorable, nonetheless.

Dare continues to “serenade” me the entire way home. When we pull into the parking lot at my apartment a few minutes later, he stops singing.

“I like that sonnnnng,” he says quietly. “Jusss like I likeyouuu.” He gives me a wide smile and then winces. “Owwwww. My face hurts.”

I’m out of the car and to the passenger side before he can find the handle to open it.

“Just like you *like* me, huh?” I tease, helping him out of the car. I steady him, and we walk to the door.

He bellows out a laugh. “No. I love youuu.” He goes to plant a sloppy kiss on my cheek but pulls back. “Owwww. My lip hurts.”

I shake my head and get him inside, locking the door behind us. I think it’s probably going to be a long rest of the night.

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Chapter 51

Darian

The next day, Lev comes home after work around dinner time. I vaguely remember him waking me earlier to give me some Tylenol and water. I managed to get something in my stomach, take a shower, swallow another round of painkillers and a lot of water, and ice my face—he wasn't kidding; I look like I went about eight rounds.

At some point, I found a pair of Lev's sweatpants and a T-shirt and put them on. They fit length-wise since we're close to the same height, but they're a little bit baggy on me because he's such a gorgeous hunk of man and I'm still a bit lean.

When he opens the door, I'm sitting on the couch in the living room, watching something on TV.

"Hey," he greets me, tossing his keys on the kitchen island.

"Hey yourself," I say as he comes into the room to join me.

He leans down and gently places a kiss on my swollen lip. "How are you feeling?" he asks. His expression is filled with concern and genuine care.

How is he not angry?

“Kind of rough,” I answer truthfully.

He chuckles, reaching his hand out to cup my cheek softly. I catch the scent of motor oil and chrome polish on his hands, and it smells divine. It’s about as manly as one can get. When he pulls away, I notice his hands are a little dirty. It’s such a turn on.

“Let me wash up, and we’ll get some dinner,” he says. I nod, and he walks toward the bedroom. “Then you can tell me all about last night.”

I hear the water turn on in his bathroom sink, and about five minutes later, he’s joining me on the couch, now in his own comfortable clothes. Damn, he looks really good in gray sweatpants.

“Want leftovers or pizza? Chinese? *Hoagies*? Or perhaps a *sub*?” His dimple craters his cheek as he smiles at me.

I snort, remembering one of the first times we hung out when he came back and we were laughing about the hoagie versus sub debate.

“Chinese or hoagies are fine,” I say, and he quickly places an order for the sandwiches on his phone.

“So.” Lev sits sideways, facing me with his leg bent in front of him and his arm on the back of the sofa. His fingers play with the longer lengths of my hair.

I turn to him, and my eyes track down his sexy forearm, his black ink intricately swirling and interwoven in various designs, not ending until his knuckles begin.

God, this man.

“What happened?” He interrupts my lusting gaze.

I breathe in a deep sigh and then tell him everything, starting with a conversation I had with my dad, which is what set me off.

“He *finally* called to ask how Thanksgiving was,” I tell Lev. “It’s not like he really cared, but I know he called just so he could say he did. You know, tell all his buddies that he checked in on me. I told him that I wanted to talk to him about buying the house from him and my mom, and things went south from there.” I squeeze my hand into a fist and release it, pulling it up to look at my swollen knuckles. “While I was talking to him, Ryan had messaged that a few of our friends were meeting at the Exchange and that he wanted me to come along. Boys’ night, he said. I was annoyed at my dad and wanted to see Ryan, so I went.”

I end the recap with a shrug. While I’m talking, Lev is looking at me so intently. His eyes carry nothing but love and concern. It sort of makes my

heart hurt and my stomach twist.

I continue to tell him about the night and how we were having a great time, drinking, laughing, and just blowing off steam. “We were just chilling and fucking around, you know?”

He nods.

“This group of guys that we hadn’t seen around there before were sitting at a high-top, laughing, making snide comments and just being jerks. I guess they didn’t like my look or the fact that we were kind of being drunk and affectionate with one another, and they just *had* to say something.” I stop and swallow a drink of water, replaying the grotesque words that left their mouths. “That something was inexcusable, and I shoved one of the guys.” I puff out my chest and swipe my thumb down the side of my nose. “He *was* the biggest guy there,” I say.

Lev just shakes his head, and I continue.

“So the shoving led to a fight, and my guys went after his guys. It was broken up pretty quickly, and Garrett kicked them out but not before we got slightly roughed up.”

When I’m done sharing, we sit in silence for a few minutes. I reach my arm out and put it on Lev’s arm on the back of the sofa. His hand falls from my hair, and he pulls back to lace our fingers together right as the doorbell rings. I sigh in frustration that we have to break contact when he releases my hand and stands up. He gets the door, brings the food and drinks, and sits back down with plates of sandwiches—*hoagies*—and chips for us. It should be an uncomfortable silence, but it’s not.

After a bit, Lev swallows and looks at me. “Are you okay?”

I choke on my bite. I don’t understand why he’s not pissed about this. I got wasted and got in a fight, and Garrett had to call him at like three in the morning. Again. And he’s worried about *me*. He should be mad at me.

“Aside from the fact that my face hurts a lot and you had to come get me, I’m fine. I’m mad at my dad, but . . . I’m sorry you had to come and get me,” I apologize, glancing Lev’s way. “Again.”

“Hey,” he says, putting his sandwich down. “You needed me, and I was happy to be able to be there. I’m glad Garrett called me. I will always be there when you need me, Dare.”

I feel my eyes start to burn. *Am I really going to tear up over this?*

“I’m just glad you’re okay. But seriously”—Lev takes my hand in his—“you gotta stop these fights or Garrett’s going to have your head.” He lets

go and gently pushes my head to the side.

Despite our joking, I'm shocked. Confused. Emotional. "You're too good for me," I say, choking back my tears.

Lev shakes his head gently. "Stop. Don't, okay? You're amazing, and you deserve to be loved. Let me love you."

Tears roll down my face, and Lev reaches over, pulling me to him into an embrace. He kisses my forehead and rubs my back, and I cling to him, letting the tears fall in their cleansing way.

I know I don't deserve him, but I'm going to hold on with everything I have to everything he's willing to give me. I've lost so much, and I know that at this point, there is no way that I'd survive if I lost him, too.

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Chapter 52

Levon

I love Christmas time. The cold, the weather, the decorations, the smell of cookies, everything.

The weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas always go fast. Business at the shop has picked up significantly, and my days have been extended to accommodate the needs of our patrons. Uncle John has been helpful in giving his time at the shop, working with me. However, I don't have as much time at home, and I definitely don't have as much time with Dare.

This weekend, I have plans to decorate my apartment and get a tree, and I made arrangements for Dare to join me. By the time Saturday afternoon rolls around, I'm buzzing with excited energy. I get dressed in warm clothes and put my baseball hat on before grabbing my coat and keys and heading over to Dare's house.

I pull up into his driveway, and almost like we're in a fairy tale, it starts to snow. Big, wet flakes fall on my hat and shoulders as I make my way to his front door. I'm met by my beautiful boyfriend as I step onto the front

porch of his house. Dare looks fantastic with his black jeans and a heavy olive-green hiking jacket. He has a black beanie perched on the top of his head.

“Hey,” he says, coming outside and closing the door behind him.

“Hey yourself,” I greet him.

I gently push him up against the door and give him a steamy kiss. His lip isn’t swollen anymore, and his eye and cheek are only lightly bruised. He looks rugged and tough, and I have to admit that it does something to me.

“Ready?” I ask when I pull away from his plush, warm lips.

“I am,” he says. “I’m excited for this. We haven’t had a tree, let alone a real tree, for years.”

Something squeezes my heart, realizing that just like Thanksgiving, Dare probably hasn’t had a proper Christmas for a while. I don’t know why I didn’t consider that before now. It just makes me want to remind him exactly how magical Christmas can be.

On the way to the Christmas tree farm, I stop and get us some hot chocolate. Dare is beaming the whole time, and it’s so incredibly cute. As we pull into the parking lot of the farm, Dare leans closer to the windshield and gazes out at the sight. There are twinkling lights strewn from the poles, people in flannel shirts and boots, and a small fire burning by where you pay for the tree once you’ve chosen it. We can hear Christmas music playing through a set of speakers. With the snow falling, it’s truly a winter wonderland.

I get out of the car and meet Dare, and then we both walk toward this little red shed decorated in Christmas lights where they’re selling hot chocolate and snacks from the half-window. We already have our hot drinks, but we walk up to greet the people, and I ask them for a saw.

Dare’s eyes go wide, and he squeezes my hand. “You’re cutting your own tree?” he asks.

Chuckling, I say, “Yeah, of course. You’ve never had a freshly cut tree?”

Dare doesn’t get to answer before the man in the shed hands me a saw. I listen to his instructions about where we can go and what we are permitted to cut. He asks if we want a ride out with the tractor and wagon, and I thank him and accept.

“Come on,” I tell Dare, taking his hand and pulling him into the wagon. I steal a glance at him, and my heart swells. His face is pure wonder and joy, and it might be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

“This is so cool,” he says with a laugh.

I throw my arm around his shoulders and pull him close to me as we ride on the back of the wagon for a short distance into the field where the mature trees are growing. When the tractor driver stops and gives us a few more instructions, we get off of the wagon, and I take Dare’s hand again. Walking around, we look at the trees, trying to find the one that we want to leave with. A few minutes in, I stop and pull Dare behind one of the taller, thicker trees.

Dropping the saw on the ground, I wrap my arms around him and kiss him. Dare responds, sighing into me. I plunge my tongue into his mouth, exploring him as his tongue tangles with mine. His lip ring is cold, and I feel it pressing against my lips. *God.*

We kiss for a few moments and eventually pull away. Resting my forehead against his, I smile.

“I’m so glad you came with me today,” I tell him, pulling him in for a hug. He comes to me willingly, wrapping his arms around me.

“Thank you for asking me,” he says. The snow and hot chocolate and entire atmosphere are magical. I’m loving the fact that this is special for Dare. It makes me proud that I can give him this. I want to give him everything.

I separate from him and lean down to pick up the saw again. “Now,” I tell him, “let’s find a tree.”

We spend about a half an hour walking around, searching for the perfect tree, and just as I’m about to give up, Dare points to one catacorner from where we are standing.

“What about that one?” he asks.

We walk closer and make an appraising circle around the tree. The height is good, the fullness is perfect, and there are no bald spots that are glaringly obvious.

“This is perfect, lycan.”

I get down on my hands and knees on the blanket they gave us when we exited the wagon. Using the saw, I start cutting into the trunk of the pine. It’s not easy, and I’m sweating even though I’m cold, but we eventually get the trunk disconnected. My hand has spots of sap, and I bring it to my nose to smell the amazing scent of pine. I offer my palm to Dare, and he takes a sniff.

“Mmmmmm,” he says. “That smells really good.” I jokingly move to touch his face, and he bats my hand away. “Don’t even think about it,” he threatens, a laugh sneaking out of him.

I start to encroach on his space again, and he tries to run but he loses his traction in the snow and falls flat on his stomach. I quickly decide to fall on top of him, and we roll around in a heap, laughing and wrestling in the snow. I grab a handful and smash it into his face. He’s sputtering and laughing and spitting the snow out when he grabs a handful of his own and shoves it in my face. The cold, freezing semisolid slides down the side of my face. We can’t stop laughing, even though we are freezing and our faces are wet, but we are enjoying the boyhood this brings out in us.

Dare sits up and presses his wet, cold lips to me, and I lap the water off of them, kissing him back. We meld into each other on the snowy ground, but we’re forced to get up when we hear the tractor coming through the rows of trees. We quickly brush each other off, still playing around, and walk over to our tree.

“Do you want one for your house?” I ask him.

“Nah. I have an artificial one I can put up eventually. Thank you, though.”

I nod, and we take our tree. I grab the trunk, and Dare lifts the top as we carry it to the wagon. After loading it with a few other trees that the other customers picked out, we make our way back to the shed, and I pay for the tree. We work together to tie it into the car and close the trunk as tightly as we can. Then we start on the way back to my apartment.

Dare is animated and talks the whole drive back. I don’t think he stops smiling the entire time, either. He tells me story after story about Nate and their Christmases together. How Nate used to hand-make him a card every year, even when they got older and it was a bit corny. He shares about how the two of them would make a paper chain at the beginning of December for counting down the days until Christmas Eve and fight over who was going to tear the ring off every night. He shares about this Christmas ornament Nate made in kindergarten and how Dare thought it was creepy looking, so he always hid it around at the back of the tree when no one else was watching. Little snippets of joy from their life together.

I wonder if maybe these things, these memories he’s been holding onto, haven’t been shared with anyone else in years. I feel honored that he’s

sharing it with me now. It’s so adorable, and I’m beaming because he’s so happy. I did this. I gave this to him and I love it.

After we pull into the parking lot outside my apartment, I park the car and get out, glad that we made it home with no issues. The roads are noticeably starting to turn more slick. We get out of the car and undo the tree, then take it inside and set it up in its stand. We take a few minutes to make sure it’s straight and secure, watered, and ready. Then I wash my hands with the GoJo that I use in the shop, and although it doesn’t remove all of the sap, it does a good enough job that I won’t be sticking to everything I touch tonight.

While I go back out to the car to grab everything else, including Dare’s bag, he runs the vacuum to pick up all the dropped needles. By the time I come back in, he has Christmas music playing from his phone and he’s started to change out of his wet clothes.

I immediately advance on him, the sight of his bare legs and chest sending my pulse skyrocketing. Ripping my wet clothes off, I push him onto the couch and climb on top of him. Our bodies are chilled, our skin covered in goose bumps, and we grind together, kissing and making out like teenagers. Before things go further, I sit up and pull him with me. We finish changing and put on fresh everything, then go back to the living room and unpack the decorations for the tree.

Hours pass as we decorate the tree and my apartment, laughing, talking, and bopping our heads to the music. Occasionally, we break out into an off-tune sing-along. My personal favorite part is when we stop and make out, Dare being his irresistible self. After we eat some food and get ready for bed, we sit on the couch and admire how the lights on the tree cast a soft, colorful glow that illuminates the room, bringing warmth and a subtle feeling of Christmas to the room.

Dare sighs as he settles deeply into my side. He plays with my fingers, occasionally kissing my knuckles and the back of my hand. “I think today was one of the best days ever,” he whispers.

I kiss the top of his head, a smile spreading across my lips. “I’m so glad. I had a lot of fun too.” Sitting in comfortable silence, we both grow tired, our body heat and heartbeats helping to make the moment feel extraordinarily special.

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Chapter 53

Darian

For the first time in a long time, I truly felt loved and appreciated . . . and most importantly, wanted. The day Lev planned was amazing, and although sometimes I don't feel like I deserve it, he wants to give it to me, and I need to learn how to let him.

With a wicked smile on my face that he hasn't seen because he's still sleeping, I roll over toward my boyfriend. That word still makes my heart soar. I peel his underwear down, noting that he has a nice little morning wood waiting for me.

Well, it's not little. I chuckle to myself and shift closer.

Lev stirs, moving a leg to the side and cracking an eye open as I touch his hardening dick and lean over, taking just his tip into my mouth. I look up at him through my half-lidded eyes as he nods and then hisses. Maintaining eye contact, I pop off and lick him from the base to his tip. Lev smiles, and his dimple sinks into his cheek. He puts an arm behind his head and watches me.

"Good morning," I say, and I give him another full-length lick, stopping at the tip with another suck. "Hey."

Lev groans, and his other hand reaches down and runs through my hair. “Hey yourself,” he whispers.

I lean over him and take all of him, covering him in my saliva and hollowing my cheeks as I pull up and suck him back down again. I grab the base of his cock and slide my mouth up him, a string of saliva and precum coming along with me. Lev groans again, moving his other leg to the side so I can fit better between them. I’m on my knees, bending over and licking Lev like a lollipop, swirling my mouth around the tip. After popping off again, I glance up at his beautiful blue eyes, a line of spit purposely dropping from my mouth and running down his cock. I use my hand and work him, playing with his tip and moving down to his balls.

“God!” he lets out on a breath, his hand gripping my hair tightly and his hips pushing up. It sends a shock right to my groin and spurs me on. I take Lev all the way to the back of my throat and swallow. “Fuuckk,” he moans. “You feel so good, Dare.”

I repeat the action, gagging occasionally when I get a little overzealous, but his salacious moans and groans tell me he’s enjoying himself.

Suddenly, he grabs at my back, pressing his palm into me. “I’m going to come.”

He groans again, and his dick starts to pulse as a warm liquid coats the back of my throat. He pushes his hips toward my face, riding out his orgasm, and I swallow it all down. Then he moves his hand from behind his head and strokes my cheek before pulling me up to him.

“Kiss me,” he orders as he pulls my lips to his. I relax on top of him and melt against his warm skin. Our hearts are beating quickly in tandem as I breathe with him and kiss him again.

Our lips play with one another, our tongues tangling languidly. It feels so good that I sigh against Lev. He pulls me closer, and for a long time, we stay just like that, me on top of him, kissing, hugging, just being together. An hour or so passes, and it’s so perfect with all the physical touch and warmth and gentle kisses that I don’t want this moment to end.

But I have an important interview tomorrow morning—one with Julian’s business partner, Brian—and so I have to get home and prepare. It’s midday by the time we get up and dressed and Lev drives me home.

I spend a few minutes putting together some samples for the interview, but it doesn’t take me long, and I feel confident and ready. And there’s actually something else I want to do as well.

The other night, I had an idea for part of Lev's Christmas present. It's going to take some time to make, so I want to get started on it as soon as possible. I spend the rest of my evening working on that.

Lev and I text a few times, and it's just before midnight when I finally crawl into bed with a satisfied feeling that radiates down to my bones. That's something I have not felt for a *very* long time.

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"I'm really impressed with your portfolio, Darian."

Brian and I are on a virtual call. I sent over everything I prepared and some things that I held onto from previous projects before I went to bed last night. Just like Julian said, Brian is a nice guy, and he has a keen eye for good art and design. Julian let me know ahead of time that Brian was looking for a specific flair, and that helped a little when I was showcasing my work to give to them.

"I think you may be exactly what we need," Brian says. "Let me come up with a few things and ideas and numbers, and I'll get back to you."

My heart is beating out of my chest, and my palms are sweaty. This could be real! "Thank you so much, sir," I say, trying to swallow.

"Please," he says with a smile, "call me Brian. Julian would kill me if he heard you call me sir." We chuckle. "You have a good day, and I'll be in touch."

After hanging up the call, I push my chair back and spin it around in a full circle. I may have just landed a job. One that is more than just an occasional contract. I'm so excited that I grab my phone and shoot Lev a text.

Me: Hey! I'm done with the call and it went great! I think I might have gotten it! *eyeballs emoji*

Lev: Hey yourself. That's awesome! Way to go! I want to hear about it. Can you meet me later?

Me: I'd love to. Do you have to work late?

Lev: Shouldn't be too late. Can I text you on my way home?

Me: Yeah! I'll be here. Love you.

Lev: Love you too. *smile emoji*

I will never get tired of hearing those three words from Lev. They are harmony and honesty and sunshine and moonlight, all wrapped into one. I'm struggling to believe that things might actually be going well for me in my life right now. It's been this way since Levon Richardson came back and opened himself to me. That in itself would have been enough, but he seems to be the good luck charm that I needed to make everything start to get better.

***

Lev: Hey. I'm done. Can I come over?

Me: Hey yourself! Sure. I'm getting in the shower now. Let yourself in?

Lev: Don't shower. Wait for me. Better yet, start it and I'll be there to join you.

An excited shiver runs down my spine, and a smile breaks out over my face. If Lev wants to shower with me, then that is more than okay.

I get out of bed and discard my clothing in the hamper. I can't remember if I unlocked the door or not, so I walk naked through the house to the front door and unlock it. Then I head back upstairs to the bathroom and start the water in the shower so it can warm up. I brush my teeth and quickly use my grooming kit on the nice little patch of hair at the base of my shaft.

When the water is hot enough, I step into the shower, standing under the glorious stream and letting the water consume me. I wash myself quickly, hoping that Lev has some ideas when he gets here.

I don't have to wait long before I feel a blast of cold air and look out the glass door. Through the steam, I can see the magnificent outline of a man. After making quick work of his shirt and pants, Lev joins me in the shower, his broad shoulders, chiseled abs, semihard dick, and muscular legs all on full display. His eyes have a hunger I have only seen a few times, and it sends a bolt of lightning straight to my cock.

Shutting the glass door behind him, he growls a hello to me while his large body crowds me and pushes me back against the tile wall. I yelp at the cold tile on my back and ass cheeks. Lev's hand comes up and gently settles at the back of my neck, and he leans down and covers my lips in an almost punishing kiss. I'm rock-hard now, and I push forward to grind into him as his lips and tongue tangle with mine.

We pull away for a gasp of breath, and his arms slide around me in a hug.

"I missed you," he says. He backs me into the stream of water again and then grabs the body wash and squirts a large amount into the palm of his rough, work-worn hands. He starts lathering up my body, rubbing my shoulders, neck, and chest, spending a little extra time on my nipples. I moan and close my eyes as he flattens his palm over my left nipple while he pinches and slides off my right. He alternates before he turns me to the water to rinse off. Twisting me back around to face him again, he leans down and takes my right nipple into his mouth, sucking hard. I wail, gripping his shoulders and thrusting my hips forward. He moves to the other nipple and does the same, then trails his tongue up my chest and neck and to my lips. He licks the water off of my lips and kisses me again. It's so fucking erotic, I feel like I could come right now. But even as good as this is, I want more.

Like he can read me, Lev drops to his knees, and I gasp. He's absolutely gorgeous down there, his devilish grin and deep dimple giving me a hint as to what he has in mind. With his palms still covered in suds, he grips one of my ass cheeks with one hand and starts to massage my balls with the other. He's careful and intentional in his touch, avoiding my dick as he rubs the flesh of my butt and the softness of my sack. He gently rolls my balls in his hand, tugging lightly, eliciting the deepest groan of pleasure out of me yet. My hips are moving slightly of their own accord, and I'm lost in the pure euphoria that he's brought me into.

A sudden tight grip on my shaft makes me jerk. Lev works his hand up and down my length, twisting at the tip and going back to the base again.

"OhmygodLev," I moan. "So good."

My hands are busy, too, one gripping his shoulder and the other running through this wet hair. I grip his hair tightly in a fist as he pulls me forward and opens his mouth. His tongue flattens along the underside of my hard cock as his mouth envelops me.

"Jeeesusss," I moan.

Lev continues to work me over, taking me all the way back his throat until his nose hits my abdomen. Then he's bobbing his head, licking and sucking,

occasionally spitting out the water that flows into his mouth from the shower. The noises are pornographic between my moans and his slurps, sucks, and spits, and that makes everything even hotter, despite the fact that the water from the shower is starting to run lukewarm.

Finally, Lev pulls off of me, and his voice is hoarse as he says, “Turn and put your hands on the wall, baby.”

I shiver and quickly do what he says. He pushes one of my legs farther out as he massages both of my cheeks, pulling them apart and giving them a squeeze before he moves them back in again. I know what’s coming, and I can barely contain myself.

“Do you trust me?” he asks.

“Yes. Oh my god. Yes.” I breathe.

Lev separates my cheeks, and then his warm, wet tongue glides from my taint to the top end of my crack. He repeats the action a few times before he centers his attention on my hole, licking and sucking. A string of noises and sounds that are unrecognizable tumbles from my lips and throat as I go pliant against his tongue. My dick is so hard. I’m pretty sure all of the blood in my body is filling it right now.

Lev licks my ass again, and then he brings his tongue to a point and plunges it inside of me.

“Fuuckk,” I yell, coming all over the wall in front of me. “Holy . . . shit . . . Lev,” I breathe. “I just came untouched. Ohmygod.” The words spill from my lips.

Lev chuckles and continues working my hole with his tongue until he must feel I’m loose enough, then he stands up.

I turn around to see him grab the body wash, and he takes a moment to wash his face under the now-cold water. Then Lev turns off the water, kisses me, and steps out of the shower, guiding me with him, his hands on my hips. I’m shivering, and so he grabs a towel and wraps it around me. He kisses me again before grabbing another towel for himself. After drying himself off, he gets behind me and pushes his body against my back. I feel his cock hardening more as he holds me from behind.

“On the bed, baby. I’m not done with you yet.”

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Chapter 54

Levon

Dare and I drop our towels and crawl under the covers. We spend a few minutes making out, grinding our hips together and warming our bodies up. Dare is on top of me, and I flip him over and adjust the covers so they still cover us, keeping us warm. Bracing myself on either side of his head, I lean down and nip his lip ring. I tug on it, and he whimpers. Our lips come together again, and our tongues assault one another. My hips are moving, and I feel like I'm losing control.

"I need to be inside you, lycan. Like *now*."

Dare inhales. "Lube. It's in the drawer." He moves his arm over to half point to the table next to the bed.

I huff out a laugh. "I remember," I say, kissing him before leaning over and opening the drawer to take out the bottle of lube. The snick of the lid makes my dick jump, and I feel Dare's erection growing against my thigh. He's hard again. Already.

Holy shit.

I sit up on my knees between his legs and pour the lube all over my fingers, getting them slick. I gently lift one of his legs up, and his beautiful pink hole is right there, inviting me inside.

“Ready?” I ask, and he nods.

Dare’s head falls back into the pillows when I push my first finger in up to the second knuckle. It goes in easily thanks to the tongue fucking I gave him a few minutes ago. He groans as he bears down on me.

“More,” he breathes.

I pull my finger out and circle his hole, going back in with two fingers as he asked. He moans and then exhales a soft hiss. I finger fuck him for a moment, moving and twisting, opening and closing my fingers to prep him for my aching cock.

“More,” he says again, forcefully this time, and I chuckle.

“Greedy little lycan, aren’t you?” I whisper, pushing a third finger in.

Dare gasps, and his hips buck as I swivel my fingers and press gently on his prostate.

“FUCK!!!” he shouts, his hips jerking up and his abs contracting.

Damn, my man is so hot. I push a fourth finger into him, and he inhales sharply before looking up at me.

“Now, Lev. Please. I need you now.”

I pull my fingers out of him and grab one of the towels from the floor, bringing it onto the bed with us. Then I pick up the lube bottle again and pour a generous amount onto my hand.

“I need a condom,” I tell him breathlessly.

He leans over again and points at the drawer.

I quickly grab a condom, open it, and roll it on, then slick up my shaft.

“How . . . how do you want me?” Dare asks breathlessly. His cheeks are flushed, and his pupils are blown wide. He’s so beautiful.

“I want to look at you.” I don’t even think about it. That’s just what I need.

Dare nods and spreads wide for me. His cock is lying flat on his abs, dripping all over him. I’m as hard as a rock and so ready to be inside him. I move closer to him, one hand on his thigh and the other holding my dick.

“Ready?” I ask.

He looks like sex on a stick as he bites his bottom lip, grips his own dick, and nods. I line the head of my cock up against his tight hole and slowly push.

Oh my fuck. He feels like heaven.

We both groan loudly as I push in farther, and he grips my forearm with his free hand. I bottom out and lean over, kissing his plush, swollen lips.

Dare pushes me up gently. “You’ve gotta move. Please. Move.”

His hips are trying to thrust, and I feel his hole tighten around me. He’s warm and slick and so, so tight. I gently push into him again, teasing him by not thrusting. He gives me about three of those little pushes before he snaps.

“Fucking fuck me!”

I laugh and push up, bending his knees and holding his legs so that he’s spread wide open for me. Then, I do what he asks. I pull out and thrust back in, pull out and thrust back in, fucking Dare hard. He’s moaning and breathing heavily and letting me know just how much he likes it. I’m going at it relentlessly, showing him no mercy.

“You.” Thrust. Pull back. Moan from Dare. “Feel.” Thrust. Pull back. Moan from Dare. “So.” Thrust. Pull back. Loud moan from Dare. “Damn.” Thrust. Pull back. Heavy exhale from Dare. “Good.” Thrust. Pull back. Slam in and pull back. Slam in and pull back. “Fuckfuckfuck,” I say.

“Come. Come. Come,” Dare chants, grabbing his dick and stroking furiously.

The sight of him coming undone along with the sweat and bolt of electricity that jolts down my spine has me getting close. My balls are pulled up so tightly, and as Dare groans out another of those pornographic moans, coming all over his hand and chest, his ass squeezes my cock tightly inside him, and I explode. My dick pulses in him, and I thrust a few more times and then fall onto him, exhausted. We’re both gasping for air, trembling, and I feel like my heart is literally going to beat out of my chest.

We lie together just catching our breaths before he laughs.

“So that shower we just took . . . ” he says, arching his eyebrows.

Yeah, we’re both sweaty and covered in cum.

“You think the water is hot again?” I ask, grinning. I kiss Dare’s lips, then his jaw and neck, and I bury my tired head in the crook of his neck and start to lick the salty sweat off of him. He makes the sweetest little sound. I push up and roll off of him, grabbing the towel from the floor. “I’ll be right back,” I tell him.

After rinsing off in the shower once more, I brush my teeth with the spare toothbrush that Dare has for me and go back to the bedroom. Dare has

water bottles on his bedside table and smiles his delicious smile at me.

Standing, he gives me a quick kiss. Then he goes into the bathroom, and I hear the water running again. I chug an entire bottle of water and go to the kitchen to get another one. I grab an extra one for Dare and then head back up to his room and shut and lock the door behind me. Dare is already in bed, covers up to his chin. I crawl in next to him and kiss his cheek.

“Come here,” I tell him, pulling him over so his head is on my chest. I rub his back gently, and he breathes a soft sigh.

Eventually, Dare starts to quietly tell me about his interview today with Julian’s business partner. There’s a childlike excitement to his voice, and I can tell he smiles from time to time as he talks. His fingers move mindlessly up and down my abs, and I’m in this sort of post-sex bliss as I listen.

He seems to find a peace in knowing that this thing with Julian’s business could really work out, and I tell him several times how proud I am of him. We eventually let sleep overtake us, and although we roll over a few times throughout the night, we wake still in one another’s arms.

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Chapter 55

Darian

I got the job. Holy shit. I got the job! Not only is it *the* job, but they want to offer me an actual full-time job straight off instead of just a contract role. I would have benefits and steady pay.

I'm shaking as I thank Julian and Brian and tell them that I'll look over the terms and let them know for sure what my decision is within the next day or two. I already know that I'm going to accept it, but I don't want to seem too eager. It may be dumb, but that's what comes out of my mouth, so I go with it.

After hanging up the call on my computer, I slam my laptop lid shut and spin in my chair, pumping my fist in the air.

"HELL YEAH!!" I shout. Unless the paperwork is telling me I have to cut my fingers off, I'm taking it. I just need to read it to be sure.

I immediately reopen my laptop to see if they've emailed me yet. Okay, maybe I'm a little excited. Nothing is there, so I grab my phone and send a text to the most important person in my life.

Me: Hey! You free?

I pace my room as the bubbles fold and open a few times.

Lev: Hey yourself. I can be free for you. What's up?

My heart flutters as I type out my next message.

Me: Can I call you?

Lev: Call me.

I hit the call button and listen to the phone ring just once before he picks up.

"Hey, little lycan. What's going on?"

I take a deep breath and try not to explode. "I got the job!! They're sending over the agreement shortly."

"Holy shit, Dare! That's amazing. Congratulations, baby. I'm so proud of you. This is awesome news!"

I laugh as joy takes over. "It's . . . Oh my god, Lev. It's huge."

I can hear him smiling as he says, "This is great. I'm so happy for you. Let's celebrate tonight."

My mind is in overdrive. "Okay. That sounds good. I am—" An email comes through on my computer, interrupting me. "Oh shit! They sent the information. Imma go and see what's up."

Lev chuckles. "Okay, lycan. Go. I'll call you later. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks! I love you!" I sit back down at the desk, clicking on the email and then opening the contract.

"I love you, too." Lev's voice is deep and sends a shudder down my spine.

The phone disconnects, and I pull it from my ear and set it down on the desk by my computer as I dive in and read the contract and agreement. It's better than I even expected it to be. The hours are flexible enough that I can keep up some of my side contracts if I want, but the pay is high enough that I could just let them go and focus solely on this job and these designs. I can't stop the smile that continues to spread on my face.

When I finish reading through the contract, I don't even hesitate. I pick up the phone and call the real estate lawyer Ryan recommended for me.

I spend quite some time on the phone with the attorney. He knows my parents, but he is truly a good man, and I'm confident he'll be able to keep their working relationship separate from mine. After I explain to him that I want to buy the house, he asks me a bunch of questions. We talk about why I

want to do it, if I know what my parents' plans are for selling it, and if I have the financial capability to buy it.

I share that I want to own it permanently and that they've said they are going to sell just after the new year. We talk more financials, and I send him over some of my bank statements, showing my sizeable savings account. He glances over everything quickly and confirms what all my research has shown—that I shouldn't have any trouble affording it as long as my parents are willing to sell it to me.

At the end of the conversation, I give him the name of a realtor that Ryan put me in touch with recently, and they encourage me to move forward with the purchase.

I can't believe this could actually happen!

***

Lev picks me up later that night and takes me out to dinner. We already made plans for next weekend with Julian and Lindsey to celebrate, but he said that he wants to celebrate with just me tonight. I'm wearing my black jeans, a long-sleeved gray T-shirt with a short-sleeved one over it that says *Your butt or mine?* in small print. My black boots and spiked choker finish the look, and I change out my lip ring for a crescent-shaped bar with two balls that meet in front of my lip. My hair is tousled, and I bypass the eyeliner because it's just dinner.

I meet Lev at the front door, giving him a smile and a kiss.

"Hey," I say, pulling away and shutting the door behind me.

"Hey yourself," he says against my lips. He looks hot, as always. He's wearing a pair of jeans, brown boots, and a lightweight navy-blue crewneck sweater. His hair is styled, and when we pull away, that dimple is on full display.

I can't help myself and lean in again, kissing his cheek and popping the tip of my tongue into the dimple. He laughs and pushes me away.

"Get out of there," he says. Laughing, he grabs my hand, and we walk down the sidewalk to the car.

We decided to go to a local Italian restaurant about twenty minutes away. I tell him all about the call today, the job, and what it means. He sends glances my way as I talk, smiling at my energy. I admit, I'm sort of buzzing. He rests his hand on my thigh and rubs up and down as he drives. The touch feels so good.

“So, after I got the paperwork and realized how good it was,” I say as we pull into the parking lot of the restaurant, “I called a real estate attorney to talk about the house.”

Lev pulls into a parking space and puts the car into park. “The house.” It’s a statement and not a question. He turns off the ignition and gets out of the car, coming around to my side as I open the door. He puts his hand out, and I take it, a warmth settling in my bones. “Hold that thought, ’kay? I want to talk about it once we’re seated.”

The restaurant isn’t fancy, but it’s nice. Mostly four-top tables set with enough room between them for people to comfortably get around. There’s a fireplace at one end of the room and a bar area in another room off of the main dining area. It’s rustic and homey and smells like garlic and butter and various sauces.

The hostess seats us at a table in the corner close to the fireplace, out of the way of the bustle of the room, and hands us our menus. She takes our drink orders and leaves the table. Lev and I look over the menu.

A few minutes later, she returns with water, Lev’s lime and soda, and my bourbon. She also puts a basket of warm bread and rolls on the table. We order our entrees, and she tells us she’ll be back if we need anything. I waste no time diving into the bread.

Warm bread with melting butter? Who could resist that!?

“Soooooo,” Lev says as I take a huge bite of the gooey, crusty bread. His plump, pink lips turn up into a smile. “You’re gorgeous.” He lets out a scoff, and I know he’s referring to the fact that I have a huge bite of bread in my mouth.

I laugh and eventually swallow it down. “I’m hungry, and it’s bread,” I say matter-of-factly. I take a big sip of my water and then put the glass down, making a show of focusing my attention on him.

“Yeah, sooooo, the house.” It’s a topic that I’ve mentioned to him a few times, but now that I know for sure I can afford it and I made contacts to get the ball rolling, I’m feeling like I’m going to make it happen. I just really want Lev to be on board, and I don’t know how he truly feels about it. “Um, so after the call with Brian and Julian, I called an attorney.” He nods and helps himself to a roll. “I want to work out some logistics, but Lev? I can buy the house when my parents put it up for sale.”

Now that it’s fully out there, I feel better. I breathe a sigh of relief and shove another big bite of bread into my mouth.

Lev swallows, and my eyes track to his Adam's apple. *Why is that so sexy?* I slide my eyes back up to his when he talks again. "Is that what you really want?"

I nod. "I really do. I have so many memories there, Lev. I basically live there by myself anyway, and if we . . . if I could be there and know that my parents weren't going to have access to it any time they want, and you know, walk in on my half-naked sex partner in the kitchen"—I smirk—"that would be nice."

He tosses the straw paper at me. "Asshole," he mumbles, a warm smile on his lips.

"I've already started making small changes, and you know I added the bathroom to my bedroom. I have some ideas for the rest of the house to make it more mine and less my parents'." I take a deep breath. "But what I really want to know and what I need you to tell me, is if you're okay with it."

Lev leans back in his chair. "It's not my choice to make for you, Dare. If you want the house, and you see it as a good investment, then buy it."

My stomach does a somersault. I want him to be on board too. I want a future with this man, and if he isn't on the same page, then I need to make a decision.

"Lev," I start, but then the server interrupts us with our meal, and I have to wait.

"Here you go, gentlemen." She places the food in front of each of us and grates the parmesan cheese over our pastas. "Is there anything else I can get for you?" We both answer that we are fine, and she tells us to let her know if we need anything else.

After she walks away, I continue. "Lev," I try again. He looks at me. I don't know why my voice is quiet, but I think I'm scared of what his thoughts are on this. "I want to buy the house, but I want to be with you more." I notice his eyes flash in the light. "I like what we have, and . . . and . . . I want this to be . . . I want . . ." Lev patiently waits for me to get out what I need to say. "I want this—us—to be for the long haul, and I want you to be on board with my decisions. I want this to potentially be something you have to consider too."

I gulp my water down and wait for him to speak.

Lev leans in and takes my hand from across the table. "Dare," he says quietly, his thumb rubbing the back of my hand. "I love you. I'm in this. I may not be ready to move into the house right now, but I've been spending

time there, and it's okay. If you want this, I want this. We'll make it all work out in the end."

A shaky breath leaves my lips, and I blink back tears. "Thank you," I say. "I still have to have a final conversation with my parents, but I needed you on board first."

"I'm yours, Dare. That means you're mine, and all of the decisions and plans and dreams? I love that you think we share them now. I love you, and I have no plans to go anywhere else."

That's all I needed to hear. A warm smile erupts on my lips. "I love you, too. Now, can we please eat? I'm so hungry I'm about to chew my arm off."

Lev laughs out loud and lets me go. We dig into our food and enjoy a lighthearted conversation and the delicious pasta and bread. When our bellies are full and our hearts happy, Lev pays the check. He congratulates me on the job and kisses me right there at the table.

After dinner, we get in the car, and Lev starts driving.

"Where are we going now?" I ask. We're heading in the general direction of his place, but he seems to have taken a different way.

Once again, he puts his hand on my thigh and squeezes. "It's a surprise," he says.

I settle back and close my eyes, letting the heat in the car and the feel of his hand on me lull me into a place of peace. My eyes open again when I hear us pull off the main road and onto some gravel. Lev drives his car over the gravel-made lot that butts up against the grass and picnic area of the lake. It's not super close to the lake because we can't drive on the grass, but it's close enough that we can still see the moon shining over the water.

"It's too cold to go down to the dock and sit at the water, but I wanted to bring you here because I know you love it, and I do too."

He lets the car idle to keep the heat on and leans over to kiss me. The warmth of his lips and the touch of his hands send jolts of arousal through me. I'm so gone for this guy. We kiss for a bit, until our lips are swollen, but we keep kissing because it feels so good.

Finally pulling away from each other and catching our breaths, we sit and hold hands, heads back on the headrests, looking out at the water and talking. It's beautiful and thoughtful and peaceful. Sitting here, in the warm car, Lev by my side, I let my mind wander.

There's something else I want to share with Lev, and I've been sort of holding back. I take a deep breath.

"This time of year is always hard for me, you know?"

Lev looks at me and pulls my hand to his lips, kissing my knuckles. “I’m so sorry, little lycan.”

I continue. “It’s just like, the tree farm with you was *so* fun. And I think about Thanksgiving and everyone sitting around the table and how we used to do that as a family. My parents used to drive Nate and me around at night to look at Christmas lights. We used to love it, and we’d always pick something like a Santa or a reindeer or candy cane or something, and whoever found the most of those on our drive would win.” I chuckle. “It was so silly, but it was so good. And I love the lights.”

Lev squeezes my hand. “I’m sorry it’s hard, but I’m glad you have those memories. I want to make more memories with you.”

“Thank you for bringing me here,” I tell Lev.

“Of course,” he answers. “I want this spot—the lake—to be ours.”

I smile from ear to ear. “I want that, too.”

Lev squeezes my hand and brings it to his lips, placing a soft kiss on the back. He lets go, and I groan. With a laugh, he puts the car in reverse and takes us to his place, where we strip to our boxers and crawl into bed. We make out a little bit more, too full to do much else, and I settle against him again, spooning. As I drift off to sleep, I think about the last few days and weeks. The shadow of gloom and the dark cloud that has been over me for so long feels like it’s lifting.

Finally.

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Chapter 56

Levon

The shop is so busy with people coming in to get gift cards and parts that I barely realize how quickly the day passes. While I'm helping a customer later in the afternoon, I notice a specific piece of jewelry that they're wearing. It leads to a conversation, and I find out that they make the pieces themselves. An idea pops into my head, and we talk a little bit more. I know it looks odd to anyone outside of our conversation, but I pull my T-shirt up and show them my tattoo. They take a picture and make a few notes before we exchange information. I'm so excited by the time they leave the shop that I can't stop the stupid grin on my face.

At the end of the day, my uncle grabs his keys and turns off the main light.

"Let's go home," he says. The temperature has dropped, and it feels like it's getting closer to Christmas. It's later than I normally get off, and my uncle tells me that it will probably be like this every day for the next week or so until we close for the holiday.

After we part, I drive to get some hot chocolate and head to Dare's house.

I knock lightly on the door and wait for Dare to come answer it. There were no other cars in the driveway but his, so I assume he's home. I probably should have texted him first, but I wanted to surprise him. Just as I'm about to knock again, I see his figure come to the door and hear the lock twist.

"Hey," he blows out, opening the door and peeking out at me. He gives my cheek a kiss and moves to the side to let me in.

"Hey yourself," I say, making sure to kiss his lips this time. He feels like heaven, and I sigh into him. "You busy?" I ask at the same time that he inquires, "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to surprise you. If you can, put some shoes on, and let's go."

Dare is in a pair of black sweatpants and a long-sleeved black T-shirt that says Dead Inside on it in red letters. My heart seizes for a short second when I find myself hoping it's just a T-shirt and not a message he's sending anymore.

"Just shoes? Should I change?" he asks, looking slightly confused.

I smile at him. "Just shoes." I go to the kitchen and lean against the island. "And hurry."

I wink at him as he beams at me. Then he runs up the stairs to do just as I asked. No more than a minute later, Dare jogs back down the steps in his checkered Vans.

"Perfect," I tell him, extending my hand to invite him to me. He falls into my open arms, and I wrap them around him and hold him tightly. I've tried hard to meet Dare's need for hugs and touch, and I know it makes him happy.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't enjoy it, too.

He sighs contentedly as I feel his body go lax and lean against me more. "What are we doing?" he asks, his lips against my neck. He pops his tongue out and gives me a little wet kiss.

I shiver, kissing his temple. "I want to go look at Christmas lights."

Dare keeps our bodies together but bends back so he can look at me. "Are you serious, Lev!?" His emerald-green eyes dance in the light of the kitchen, lit up with a childlike excitement.

I smile involuntarily. "Yeah, really. I know how much you like it, and I want to take you. It's about us and our memories now."

Dare stares at me for a second before he squeezes me tightly with a little happy squeal. "Oh my god!" he exclaims. "I'm so excited, I can't wait!!"

Pulling away, he grabs my hand and leads us out the door and to my car. I can't stop smiling as he drops into the passenger seat. "This is awesome, Lev!" he tells me, looking up at me as I close the door.

I round to my side of the car and get in, then start it up and crank the heat on. I hand Dare one of the hot chocolates I bought on the way over, and he looks like he might cry.

"Hot chocolate, too?! You're the *best* boyfriend *ever*!" he declares as he leans over and kisses me on the cheek again.

I chuckle and kiss him back.

"Hot chocolate was all it took, huh?" I tease, squeezing his thigh. He squirms against my grasp and pushes my hand away.

"Stop it. I need to drink." He takes a swig of the warm drink and licks his lips as I back out of the driveway. "Where are we going to look? Mom and Dad used to take us to Briarwood and Hunters Gate when we were kids."

I make a left turn and head toward one of the housing developments Dare just mentioned. "Let's go to Briarwood first, then." I glance over at him. He's still smiling and looking out the window, sitting up straight in his seat. I reach my hand over again and put it on Dare's thigh. I don't squeeze this time. I just set it there, warm and soothing on his upper leg, as I navigate toward the first neighborhood we'll drive through.

As I pull into a section of medium-sized houses, all decorated to the brim with lights, moving decorations, and puffy air-filled Santas and snowmen, I slow down so we can look.

"Ohhh, see that!" Dare exclaims, pointing to a house that has a full Santa sleigh with eight reindeer and packages made to look like they were falling off the roof. It's really magical.

"Ohh, I like this one." I slow to a near stop behind a line of cars whose passengers are clearly doing the same thing we are. The house has a projection screen and music playing loudly. I roll the window down more to hear the music, and we watch the lights blink and change with the music's rhythm. It's really elaborate and super cool.

We have to keep moving because there are other cars behind us, but I think we both agree that it's our favorite one so far.

We drive around this neighborhood and then another for nearly two hours. Time passes so quickly that it seems like no time at all. It was totally worth it to see Dare's face lit up and to see him so happy the whole time.

When I pull into my parking lot a few hours later, our hot chocolates empty and our hearts full, Dare turns his body sideways in the seat and looks at me. From what I can see in the illumination of the dashboard lights, he still has that same smile on his precious face, and his eyes are twinkling.

"I'm . . . Lev, that was . . . just . . . thank you."

He leans forward, bracing a hand on the center console, and I meet him as we kiss. It's tender yet firm, gentle yet full of heat and want. His tongue slides along my bottom lip, and I open for him, meeting him in a joust of tongues and warm breaths. He leans up on his knee to kiss me more deeply, and I moan at the feel of his lips and ring on mine. My hand comes up to the back of his head, and I thread my fingers through his hair. It seems to be his turn to moan now, and as we finally need to pull away to breathe, Dare rests his forehead on mine.

We're breathing a little more rapidly than we had been a few minutes ago, and I'm not even trying to hide the fact that I'm hard.

With his forehead to mine, Dare whispers, "Did you want me to stay tonight?"

He doesn't have to ask me twice, and I give him a quick peck.

"Absolutely," I say. "That was the plan."

He sits back and goes to open the door as I turn off the car and start to get out. I hear him snicker.

"What?" I ask, almost afraid of what he's going to say.

"You didn't clean the window off yet."

I lean back into the car and look over to his window. "WE JUST FUCKED" is still messily written on the window, brought to life by the steam that we created with our kisses.

I shake my head and make my way around the car, opening his door and offering my hand. "Come on, little lycan. Let's go to bed."

He keeps my hand in his, our fingers entwined as we walk into the apartment. We clamber into bed together, Dare snuggled up so tightly to me I think he would crawl inside of me if he could. I hold him, rubbing my nose in his hair. He smells so good.

A contented sigh leaves his body as he relaxes even further into me, which I didn't think was possible. "I had so much fun tonight, Lev. Thank you." He's silent for a moment as I kiss his head. It feels like he wants to say more, and I'm glad I wait for him to say it. "I haven't had that for a long time. It brought back so many memories, and yeah, it's hard. But doing that

with you, with us, that felt so right. I'm glad we're making these new memories together. I love you."

Can I melt right here?

My heart skips at his words. "You're more than welcome, baby. I had a lot of fun too. I love this, and I love you." He tilts his head up for a kiss, and our lips meet. After a few kisses, we snuggle up again and fall soundly to sleep.

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Chapter 57

Darian

"Waaakkeee upppppp!"

I feel kisses being peppered along my cheeks and neck. With a groan, I try to roll over, but Lev has his full weight on me, and I'm not able to move.

"It's time to get up," he whispers in my ear. "It's *Christmas*."

He kisses me again, bracing his hands on either side of my shoulders and bouncing the mattress.

I groan again, unable to hide the smile creeping onto my lips. "Go awayyyyyyy," I tell Lev groggily, but he doesn't let me attempt to fall back to sleep.

Not that I'm fighting very hard.

"Come on," he says. "It's time for breakfast." He starts to roll off of me.

"What time is it?" I whine.

"Nine."

"Oh cool. I just need two more hours," I say, and that asshole starts to pull the covers partway down my body. I immediately feel the chill in the

air, and I turn over and grab the edge, tugging it back. "No!" I shout, though a smile working its way onto my face.

Lev flops down on me again. "Come on, lycan! Wake up! Pleaseeeeee!" With that, he jumps up again and yanks the covers all the way off in one pull.

Gasping as goosebumps erupt on my exposed back, I kick and thrash and then jump up out of bed with him.

“Okay, okay, I’m up!” I protest, and he laughs and pulls me in for a kiss.

After getting dressed, we go to the kitchen, and Lev hands me a cup of coffee.

“Soooooooo,” I say through a yawn. “What’s so special about Christmas breakfast?”

Lev takes a tentative taste of his coffee. “Red-and-green pancakes.”

I nearly choke on my sip of the hot, delicious nectar of the morning gods. “What?” I laugh out loud.

“I *said* red-and-green pancakes,” he tells me again, as if I’m the one who is weird.

I screw up my face, and he points a spatula at me.

“Just sit there looking hot, and you’ll see.”

That draws another laugh out of me, and I do as he says.

A few minutes later, he hands me a plate with four pancakes, dyed green and red. Then he places syrup in front of me and a plate of bacon on the counter. He also refills my coffee.

I could get used to this!

Sitting beside me, Lev takes a huge piece of one of his green pancakes and shoves it into his mouth. He looks at me and smiles.

I’m still staring at the plate, shaking my head. “But they’re red and green,” I mutter. “They shouldn’t have color.”

Lev throws his head back in a loud laugh. “Just eat them. I promise they’re good.”

I tentatively cut a small bite, soak it in syrup, and bring it to my mouth. It doesn’t take more than a second for me to know he’s right. They may be oddly colored, but they’re really, really good.

“Is this something your mom did for you?” I ask.

He nods. “I guarantee you that if Lindsey is home right now, they’re eating the same thing.”

We eat in silence for a few minutes, and when we're done, I help Lev clean up.

"Come sit in the living room," he says after the dishes are all done. He drops a kiss on my cheek. "I want to give you your stocking before we go."

I freeze. "My stocking? Seriously? I didn't even think about stockings." An eager smile grows on my lips. It's been a long time since I've had a proper Christmas.

"So, have your parents not been . . . have you not had . . ." Lev is trying to ask a question that I know he doesn't want to hear the answer to.

"I went to Ryan's for dinner the last, like, three years," I tell him, "but we didn't do any presents or anything. Ry and I would get each other a bottle of liquor or some weed or something, but it wasn't anything big. The last real Christmas I had was right before Nate died."

We sit quietly for a few minutes, sipping coffee and staring at the tree. I can tell he's taking in the weight of my words.

"Well, that changes *now*," Lev declares.

He goes to the tree and takes a stocking from underneath. It's fuzzy red with a white top. He walks back to me and sets it in front of me. I notice my name scribbled in black marker at the top, and my heart stutters in my chest.

"Lev. You're too much."

"Just look at the stuff in there, please," he tells me, motioning to the stocking.

I pull out each of the gifts, taking my time to look at and comment on each one. Some of them make me laugh, like a pair of boxers with red candy canes on it, and others, like the toothbrush, toothpaste, and shaving gel, are just practical. He also got me gum, a bottle of black nail polish, an eyeliner pencil (because he loves when I have my eyes done), and a black silk sleep mask, along with some chocolate and a tin of peppermint breath mints. It's all so thoughtful, and I thank Lev for everything others as I set each gift aside. When I'm done and the stocking is empty, I place it on the floor at my feet. My head is down, eyes staring at the stocking, and I'm completely overcome with emotion.

Suddenly, I jump up and off the couch, straddle Lev's lap, and hug him. His arms wrap around my middle, and I bury my head in the crook of his neck and breathe him in. "You. Are. The. Most. Amazing. Boyfriend. Ever."

I smile and pull away. “Seriously, Lev. I mean . . . you did this for *me*? Thank you. I love it all. I feel bad, bec—”

He hugs me close again, pulling me against him and cutting me off. “Merry Christmas, lycan.”

His lips find mine, and he kisses me with all the love he has. I can fucking feel it.

When he pulls back a moment later, his eyes are lit up.

“Okay, now, let’s open presents!” Lev makes quick work of separating our presents into small piles, his and mine, and then he sits on the floor in front of me. He made me bring them over a few days ago. He said he likes seeing them under the tree. I can’t help but be amused at the adorableness of it all. This normally big, strong, somewhat serious man is like a child on Christmas. I’m here for it.

Lev hands me a present and tells me to open it. A few of the things we get from one another are practical and things that we had talked about needing or wanting. I am saving the last two gifts I got him for the end, and he seems to be doing the same.

After all of our other presents are opened, many with *ohs* and *thank yous* and *reallys!!*, I hand him the one I would like him to open next.

Taking the flat, rectangular gift in his hands, he pinches his eyebrows together. “A picture?” he guesses, squeezing a little and feeling the empty front of the rectangle.

I shrug and watch as he tears the paper off and turns it over.

Lev just sits for a full minute, soaking in what he’s holding in his hands. After a short while, his eyes meet mine, and there’s nothing in those pools of blue but love and adoration. It makes my heart soar.

“Did you do this?” he asks quietly, referring to the eleven-by-fourteen-inch print he’s holding in his hand, his fingers tightening on the dark wood frame.

“I did,” I confirm, trying to hold back a smile.

“Dare . . . this . . . it’s us!” Lev turns the picture to show me, and I laugh, since I drew it and know exactly what it is. “I can’t believe you made this!”

The print is a drawing I did in between contracts and jobs. It’s us, lying side by side on the dock by the lake at sunset. It’s based on the night we met and hooked up there. Maybe that was the moment I knew that he was going to be mine? It was a special moment for me, and I wanted him to have a part of it, too.

“This is amazing. Thank you.” He sets the print down, pushes up on his knees, and tugs my head down for a searing kiss. When he pulls away, he shakes his head.

“You are so good. So talented. Wow,” he says, and my cheeks heat up from his praise.

“I just wanted you to have something of us,” I tell him.

He smiles again and kisses me. “I love it. I need to figure out where to hang it, but it’s going up.”

I kiss him again quickly.

“Here.” He hands me the next present, and I take it. It’s a medium-sized box, pretty flat and shaped like a rectangle.

“Did you get me a tie, Lev?” I tease. I know it’s not a tie because it has some weight to it.

“You’re a pain in the ass. Just open it.” The air in the room is light, and the tone is playful. I love it.

I smirk at him and peel the paper off of the box. Crinkling it into a small ball, I set it beside me and slowly take the lid off of the box. There’s red tissue paper folded over the gift, and I lift it with my hand. A gasp leaves my mouth, and my eyes fly up to Lev. He’s grinning, his dimple on full display.

I reach in and lift out the wrist cuff. It’s made of soft, black leather with three snaps to close around the wrist. In the center is a silver disk that has a debossed design of the Wolf Pack tattoo pressed into it—the tattoo that all of the guys got, including Nate, and the one that I got after Nate died. I’m having a hard time finding words. All I can do is exhale Lev’s name.

He sits in silence with me while I work to fasten the cuff. My hand is shaking, so Lev gets up and helps me.

“A client at the shop came in with something similar. Not the Wolf, of course, but the cuff, and I had to get you one.” After it’s in place, he kisses the palm of my hand. “It looks good.”

Our eyes meet, and I swallow hard. My eyes fill with tears, and I turn my wrist around to look at it.

“It . . . it’s, um . . . oh my god. It’s perfect.” I’m so taken aback by the thoughtfulness of this gift. My boyfriend is absolutely the best. Not only did he get that the Pack was something I chased after, but he also gave me this gift that makes me feel like I now have another piece of my brother with me. “Thank you,” I whisper. He pushes up on his knees and kisses me.

“You are so welcome.”

I hug him, and we pull away, our foreheads resting together as we both take a moment. I think we’re probably both thinking of Nate, and of us, and what this all means.

“I want this to also be a statement of commitment, Dare. I want you. I want you to be mine, now and in the future. It’s us. You and me.”

I sniff and nod against his forehead. “I want that too,” I say again. “I want that so badly. I’ve always wanted that.”

Lev chuckles. “I know.” His hand comes behind my head, and he pulls my face to his in a kiss that feels like we’re sealing our words. It’s a promise. A feeling of positive finality. I’m his. He’s mine. This is it. Us.

We take our moment and finish exchanging the remaining gifts. Lev opens mine to him, and it’s a framed photo that I found when I was doing some cleaning out of the basement. It’s Nate and Lev, standing shoulder to shoulder with me pyramiding on top of them. We’re in the pool, and we’re all beaming. Our noses are sunburnt, and our cheeks are pink from the summer sun. I remember the moment. I remember when my mom took it. Right after the photo, they both threw me off of their shoulders, and I belly-flopped into the pool. It means a lot to Lev, and I can see it in his face and the way that he reacts. He’s not quite as emotional as I was about the wrist cuff, but I think I might see a shine in his eyes.

The final gift is in a small, square gold box with a green bow on top. He hands it to me and tells me to read the tag. It says “To: Lev and Dare, From: Santa.” I quirk my lips and look at him. He has a shit-eating grin on his face.

“What is this?” I ask. “And why do I think that we’re both going to love it?”

Lev laughs out loud. “I can’t wait much longer, so open it.”

Lifting my eyebrow at him, I take the lid off and then peek inside. I move the white tissue paper out of the way, and a guffaw escapes my lips. I reach in and pull out a black leather jock. There’s a delicate chain that runs from side to side across the top, swooping down just slightly. It’s clearly only for decoration. I have never worn a jock strap in my life, and my cock twitches at the thought.

“I guess this is what I’m sleeping in tonight?” I wonder out loud.

“Um, it’s what you’re going to *bed* in, but I doubt you’ll be sleeping in it.” Lev has that growly edge to his voice, and I’m now sporting a halfy.

“I can’t wait,” I tell him, putting it aside and lowering myself to the floor. I slide across his lap, straddling him, and lean in to kiss him. “Thank you. For everything. This is too much and so special and just—thank you.”

He grips my ass and pulls me closer to his middle. “You deserve all this and more. Thank *you*, and know that I love you so fucking much.”

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Chapter 58

Levon

The work that Dare did on the art and his reaction to the wrist cuff I bought him made my day. Dare was so happy, and so am I.

After we clean up the wrapping paper and put everything away where it belongs, we get dressed. When Dare comes out of the bathroom and walks toward me, swaying his hips, my mouth goes dry.

"You look great," I say, reaching out and settling my hand on his hip.

"I look great? My god. You look like a model," he counters.

I'm wearing fitted navy-blue dress pants that look like they're tailored just for me and a white button-down that's partly covered by a deep red sweater.

"You look like you just came from a *GQ* shoot," he argues.

I shake my head but smile and kiss him again, and one of my fingers slips under the gray suspenders he's wearing over a black button-down. "Mmm, these suspenders, though," I murmur, and he pushes me away with a laugh. I made sure he brought an outfit over the night he brought the gifts over. It was all in my plan.

We arrive at my parents' house a little while later, and it's warm and welcoming and smells delicious, as always. The turkey is in the oven, Christmas music is playing in the background, and appetizers are out on the table. My parents, Lindsey, Julian, Uncle John, and Aunt Tracy are all here, talking, laughing, eating, and drinking. It's fun and festive, and Dare is fitting right in, throwing jabs at Lindsey, playing around with Julian and me, and laughing when we throw them back.

"Time for presents!" my dad announces.

Dare and I already exchanged privately, but we have a few things here for my family, and they have a few things for us. My parents give us some gifts out of necessity and fun, and yes, we get our stockings. My mom even did ones for Dare and Julian this year, which I love.

I give Lindsey a few things that she wanted for her trip to Europe, and she got me a bunch of the coffee I enjoy but never buy for myself because it's expensive. Dare got her a journal and pen, so she can keep track of everything that she does when she's in Europe.

I got Julian a bottle of the red wine that Lindsey said he likes, and he got Dare a box of business cards with Dare's logo and the new company logo on them. I see a huge smile spread across Dare's face, and he excitedly thanks Julian.

Julian got me a gift card to The Copper Exchange and my parents a gift card to the restaurant where he and Lindsey met.

My parents also give Dare a few nice gifts. One a mug that says *Welcome to the family—we're all a little weird here.* That elicits a laugh from everyone.

"And now," Lindsey announces, "the Christmas pajamas!"

She hands out bags to everyone, each labeled with our names. As ridiculous as it is, it's a tradition that my mom and dad started when Lindsey and I were just babies. This year, there were several more sets to buy, but my mom is a master shopper (and maybe Lindsey is, too), and they were able to get pajamas in everyone's sizes.

We all change in different areas of the house, Dare and I groping and kissing a bit since we're finally alone, and then we come out in our matching pajamas. There's laughter and pointing, and it's just stupid silly. This year, my mom got us all elf-style pajamas with striped pants and tops that have buttons and fur running down the front. Each one comes with an

elf hat that we are required to wear. It’s terrible, but we laugh and secretly love it all the same.

When everything is done, we take our seats at the dining room table to have our dinner. Mom went all out this year, and each of us eats our fair share. We play some card games after dinner and dessert. It’s always fun, and we laugh a lot.

Dare is still laughing and having fun, but he seems a little more subdued than he had earlier today, and I wonder if maybe he’s a bit in his head or all the family stuff is starting to get overwhelming. Maybe it’s time to get going.

I stand, and he watches me as I walk behind his chair and set my hands on his shoulders. He leans his head back and sighs, looking up at me. His face is calm, but his eyes are troubled. I lean down and give him an upside down kiss before pulling away and announcing our departure.

“So, we’re going to get going,” I say.

“I bet you are—hubba hubba,” Lindsey teases.

“Gross!” I say at the same time that our mom scolds her with a “Lindsey Renee Richardson!”

We gather our things, and my mom might shed a tear or two as she pulls me into a huge hug at the door, whispering how happy she is for us and how much she adores Dare. I hug her back tightly, because it makes my heart soar.

I take Dare’s hand, and we walk outside to the car together. The air is cold, and it bites our noses as we make our way down the driveway. When we stop at the car, Dare leans into me, and I release his hand, put my arm around his shoulders, and press a quick kiss to his temple.

“Merry Christmas, baby. Did you have a good day?” I open the passenger side door, and he gets in. “You okay?”

“It was amazing, Lev.” He gives me a weak, tired smile, and I close the door I walk around to the driver’s side. As I slide into the seat, Dare continues. “Your family is just . . . it’s unreal. You’re a lucky guy.”

I take his hand and kiss his knuckles. “I am . . . in more ways than one,” I say quietly. His beautiful smile warms me from head to toe, but I notice it doesn’t reach his eyes. “What’s happening with you right now?” I ask.

He takes a deep breath. “I need to go to the inlet, and I want you to be there this year, too.”

I’m silent for a minute, letting what he just said sink in.

“Is that okay?” he asks tentatively.

I don’t want to make him wait. “If that’s what you need to do, then that’s fine with me,” I answer quietly. “Do you—is this something you do every year, Dare?”

“I do. I have since it happened. The first year, Mom and Dad came along, but after that, it was just me. I brought Ryan once or twice, but I kind of like it this way.”

I’m quiet, doing exactly what I think Dare needs from me right now.

“I want you to be with me,” he says.

I put my hand on his thigh and squeeze reassuringly. Then I start up the car and drive. It’s only a few minutes before we pull into the inlet, and I park the car. We sit in contemplative silence for a few minutes, then Dare gets out of the car and goes over to a specific part of the wall. I wait and watch as he stands in front of it, and it looks like he’s reading something there. I know he hears my footsteps before I get to him, and when I step up behind him, I slide my arms around his waist, my broad chest pressed against his back. My chin rests on his shoulder, and I stand with him, reading the little plaque that is set in the stone wall, lining the outer edge where the ground was moved and concrete was laid.

I stay quiet with him, both of us respecting the heaviness of the moment.

“I miss him,” Dare whispers, breaking the silence after some time has passed.

I pull him tighter against me. “I know.” I give his cheek a kiss. “I do too. So much.”

Dare leans into me, and we just let the silence surround us once again.

When our noses, toes, and fingers start to get cold, he turns his head and meets my lips in a soft kiss. “Let’s go.” He gives permission for us to leave as he kisses his fingers and touches the plaque. “Love you, Nate. Merry Christmas.”

I do the same and then take Dare’s hand as we walk back to the car.

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Epilogue 1

Levon

Six Months Later

"I think there is one more box in the car, and that's it. The guys have the van and will be here soon," I say as I put a heavy box of tools in the garage of Dare's home. I wipe the sweat off my brow with my T-shirt and catch Dare staring at my stomach. He has his lip ring caught under his teeth, and he's biting his bottom lip, giving me a look that drives me crazy.

God, he's so sexy.

"Ohh, my man has tools!" he exclaims, moving the box over toward the workbench that he had built for me once his parents got all of their stuff out. "Big ones," he wiggles his eyebrows at me, and I can't help but laugh, pulling him into a sweaty hug and capturing his lips in a soft kiss.

I have to get used to not just calling it Dare's home anymore. As of today, it's officially *our* home. It's not like we haven't continued to spend nights here together when we're not at my apartment, but I'm officially moving in as of today. After several long months of heated meetings with the Archers, private meetings with the lawyers, some begging and pleading, and a final

powerhouse speech by my amazing boyfriend, Mr. and Mrs. Archer finally caved and sold the house to Dare and me in a direct sale.

Yes, Dare *and me*.

We are both on the deed, making us joint owners of this house—the house that holds so many old memories and only good new ones.

Mr. and Mrs. Archer agreed but not without disdain. We never really were able to figure out why they were so hesitant to sell to Dare, but I think it had something to do with them just not wanting to feel responsible for him or anything connected to him and Nate. It makes both of us a bit sad, and I have to admit, it makes me angry, but he realized that they were never going to be what he wanted and needed them to be and has left that ball in their court. My parents have accepted him with open arms, and he's as much as a Richardson as he allows himself to be.

Since we agreed to move in together officially, we have been doing some remodeling and making the house more our own. It's a lot of space for the two of us, but we hope to fill it with a little one or two at some point in the future, and I'm sure we'll have plenty of stuff to make it not feel so big.

We also want to entertain a lot, and now that Lindsey is back from her European gallivant, she and Julian will be able to come over a lot more. They maintained their relationship through her trip. He even went to see her while she was there, traveling to meet her in a few different cities. She had a great time and gushed about it for about a month after she got back, but now she's ready to settle and "find what her calling is," as she puts it.

We also have Ryan and Katie over a lot, and they are deep into wedding planning after their engagement on Christmas. Dare will be standing with Ryan, and I'm salivating at the idea of him in a tux.

Garrett and Caleb come driving around the corner in the moving van, which holds all of the stuff from my apartment that we decided not to get rid of. Between our two places, Dare and I donated a lot of stuff, sold a few things, and consolidated what we needed to. Nolan and Chris are following behind with Chris's wife and their new baby. Everyone gets out, and we meet them in the driveway. Caleb officially welcomes Dare into the Pack with his goofy howl, and we can't help but laugh as some of us howl back. Apparently, that scares the baby, and she starts to cry. Chris's wife laughs and bounces the little one on her hip to help quiet her down.

I take the guys inside to show them what we are going to do and where we are going to put things. Boxes and furniture are carried in and put in

their respective rooms. Chris and his wife leave when the baby continues to get fussy, and the rest of the guys are not long to follow.

Dare and I are sore and tired after a full day of moving boxes and furniture, so we order a pizza and sit on the couch.

“Moving sucks,” I say after gulping down some water. I’m just glad that we have another day before Dare has to be back at his job and I have to be at the shop.

Speaking of Dare’s job, Julian and Brian have taken exceptionally good care of him, and the business is doing so well that it’s now his primary job. He may pick up a project here and there from old customers, but he’s dedicated to what Julian puts in front of him, and there is more than enough to keep him busy. He may or may not have had another contract from me when I decided to rebrand the shop, opening it to a few different markets and people. He’s also working with a newer and younger designer who needs to get her feet wet in sort of an apprentice-type role.

Dare and I often talk about things that happened in the house and memories of Nate. He’s a part of our conversations somewhat regularly, in fact. We laugh a lot, although there are also occasional tears, but the process is just that—a process. The grief will never go away, but we’re learning how to move forward and heal together.

I’m convinced that this is what Nate would have wanted for his little brother and his best friend. I know that he would have given us a rash of shit if things ended up this way and he was still here, but he would have been happy for the two of us. Dare deserves the world after all of the stuff he has had to go through, and I intend to spend the rest of my life making sure that he always feels safe, loved, and never alone.

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Epilogue 2

Darian

Eight years later

"Hey," I say, sliding under Lev's arm as he stands on the patio with his seltzer and lime, looking out over the backyard. Screams and giggles and laughter carry over from the people splashing around in the pool, and I smile inwardly at the craziness that is now our life.

"Hey yourself," Lev responds, planting a kiss on my temple and pulling me closer as he closes the lid to the grill.

"Everyone seems to be having a good time," I tell my husband, moving my hand to his ass and swatting his cheek.

Yes, I said husband. Lev proposed to me five years ago, on the dock at sunset. I cried like a baby, and of course, I said yes. We were married four years ago, at the same spot.

"Watch it!" Julian yells as he opens the screen door and joins us on the patio. "You're going to make me jealous." We turn our attention to him as he pulls a very pregnant Lindsey through the door and into our small circle.

Lindsey smacks his chest. “Please,” she says. “As if you want action from this.” She moves her hands up and down her body, signaling to her large baby belly, puffy lips, and swollen ankles and feet. “That’s why we’re *in* this situation in the first place,” she says, smiling at him.

My sister-in-law is eight months pregnant and sort of—okay *very*—uncomfortable. We planned our anniversary celebration knowing that she and Julian may have had a baby by now, but much to Lindsey’s disdain, the bun is still cooking in the oven.

“Let me get you a chair,” I say, pulling away from Lev.

Just as I get Lindsey situated, I hear a shrill scream. Lev and I both go on high alert, knowing exactly where and whom it came from. Opening the gate to the pool, Ryan and Katie’s six-year-old daughter, Lena, is carefully and sweetly holding the hand of our little guy, who just turned the big three years old last month.

“Daaaaa”—hiccup—“Daaaaaddyy Whhyyyyycann,” he cries, and I chuckle. Little Nate has heard Lev call me “lycan” since he was born, and it seems to have stuck. So Dadda and Daddy Lycan—actually Daddy WHYcan because of his little speech thing—it is.

“What happened?” I ask, meeting them in the yard. I kneel down to their level to greet them eye to eye. Little Nate throws himself into my arms as Lena explains to me in a *very* grown-up way that he stubbed his toe. I stifle a laugh, because it’s obviously a big deal to him, and ask him if I can see it. He holds out his little chubby foot, and I see a tiny red mark on his big toe.

“Oh my goodness!” I exclaim as Lev joins me, sitting with his legs crisscrossed on the grass. “He stubbed his toe,” I tell Lev, and Nate puts on a good show, crying harder, crocodile tears falling down his cheeks. I give his little dirty toe a kiss.

“He *did*!?” Lev’s eyes get wide as he feigns shock. “Let me see.” He reaches out and takes Nate’s foot into his hand. “Oh, man,” he says, looking at Nate, Lena, and me. “This is very serious. I have to go get the scissors so we can cut it off.”

At that, little Nate squeals and jumps off my lap, grabbing Lena’s hand. Together, they run off to the sprinkler that we’ve set up for them to play in. I sigh. “Another tragedy averted.”

Lev pulls me into him again and kisses my cheek. “What do you say we get these people fed so they can get the heck out of here and we can celebrate properly?” I turn toward him and smile. That damn dimple of his

is slightly less noticeable because of his stubbly face, but it's still there and still perfect. I stick my tongue into it and then follow it up with a kiss as Lev hums. He takes his hand off my thigh, stands, and reaches down to help me up. Then we head to the grill and start plating up hamburgers and hot dogs.

After the chaos is all over and everyone's eaten way too much food, we clean up and say our goodbyes to our friends and family. Then we get Nate into the bathtub. He's tired from a long day of being outside and running around, and the pool always zaps his energy.

This is good news, because my husband and I have plans. Or at least, I have plans for Lev.

We read Nate his books and give him kisses and warm milk and tuck him in.

"Night, Daddy Wycan. Night Dadda," he says in his adorable little voice. "I wuv you."

We give him another round of hugs and kisses, telling him we love him to the moon and back plus infinity, and he giggles. Lev switches on his nightlight and shuts his door, then turns to me.

"I need a shower desperately."

I chuckle. "Go get showered," I tell him.

"Or you could come with me," he says, running his hand down my chest.

I chuckle. "You go and I'll make sure everything is away and turn off the lights. I'll shower when you're done, and then we can celebrate." I give him a deep, passionate kiss before pulling away and heading down the hall, letting my hips sway teasingly as I go.

He growls in response, and as I glance back at him over my shoulder with a wink, his eyes are filled with lust. "Hurry up," he pleads, and I nod.

I finish cleaning up what I can in the kitchen. I'm sure we'll have to do a little bit more tomorrow, but I get it done enough for tonight. I make sure the doors are locked, turn off the lights, and then go upstairs to the main bedroom, which we immediately moved our stuff into when we bought the house. It's a big room, and it fits all of our clothes—which is no small feat considering we both like to look good—and our king bed.

As I'm shutting the door behind me, Lev comes out of the bathroom in just a towel, water glistening on his chest and his hair dripping. We've been together for almost nine years, and he still takes my breath away every single day.

“Mmmmmmm, sexy Daddy,” I tease, running my hand over his chest and making sure to touch his nipples. Lev hates when I call him that during our foreplay or sex, saying that the term Daddy is reserved only for the kids. So of course I tease him and use it as much as I can. “Let’s celebrate.”

“Knock it off,” he stays sternly, though he’s got a smile on his face. “Get in the shower so I can celebrate your body.”

I laugh as he swats my ass, and I hurry into the bathroom to get myself cleaned up. I have a certain plan for him tonight, and I’m glad I was able to think ahead. After my shower, I dry off, take the towel to my hair, and brush my teeth. I switch my lip ring to Lev’s favorite one and put on the wrist cuff he got me for on our first Christmas together. The leather is so soft and faded now, but I still wear it any time that I can.

I hang the towel on the rack by the door and then step into the leather jock that Lev bought for me years ago. I don’t wear it a lot, but it does make an appearance on some special occasions. Once it’s properly adjusted, I reach under the counter and pull out the harness that I hid there earlier today. I don’t think Lev has seen it since that Halloween, like, ten years ago, so it should be a pleasant surprise. Sliding it onto my leg, I attach it to the strap of the jock. It’s not perfect because they aren’t belt loops, but it will do.

After another once-over in the mirror, my dick already half hard, I turn off the light and go into the bedroom.

Lev is lying in our bed, completely naked with one hand behind his head and the other over his stomach. His abs have softened slightly over the years, but that just makes him all the more sexy. I tell him all the time that I’m ready for his dad bod, and he promises me that I may get my wish in another twenty years.

But tonight is about my husband getting *his* wish.

When he sees me come out of the bathroom in my wrist cuff, jock, and harness, his cock instantly stiffens. I rake my eyes over him, and he does the same to me. He lets out a growl of satisfaction and runs his hand down his face.

“My god,” he exhales, drawing out the words in adoration.

My dick is immediately pushing against the front of the jock, a wet spot starting to form. I climb onto the bed and straddle him, pushing his cock down between my cheeks. Leaning forward, I run my hands up his chest. Then I kiss him as he grabs the loop on the harness with his thumb.

“You look . . . fucking amazing,” he says, his lips not leaving mine. “I haven’t seen *this* for a long time, and I don’t know how, but it’s even sexier now.”

I smile against his lips, moving my hips back and forth over his hard shaft. He moans, his other hand going to the thick strap at the top of the jock while he uses the harness to help me move. The articles of . . . clothing? don’t stay on long, and I’m soon naked with Lev buried deep inside me. Moans and the slapping of skin along with words of love and affection echo through the room, and my head pushes back deeper into the pillows as he pounds into me, over and over in a delicious cadence.

“Dare . . . baby,” he says breathlessly, “I’m going to come. Grab yourself so you can come with me.”

I stroke myself hard and fast, my muscles contracting as I let go, streams of cum shooting onto my stomach and chest. That’s all it takes, and Lev fills me as my hole tightens around him. He groans, and his hips take a few shorter thrusts as he comes. Then he collapses onto me, kissing my neck and jaw, then brushing his lips back down my skin to bury his head in my shoulder. I rub my hands along his back, working to get my breathing under control.

We lie like that for several minutes before he pushes up on his hands and kisses me, nipping and tugging my lip ring into his mouth. His eyes meet mine, and he smiles softly, then kisses me even more deeply. When he’s had enough, he reconnects his eyes with mine and slides down my chest, licking up some of my mess. He pays attention to my nipples and the little valley at the top of my abs where some of my cum has collected. He looks up at me with a filthy grin and then slides up to kiss me deeply once more. I moan into his mouth, and my hips buck from the filthy sexiness he’s passing me on our tongues.

Begrudgingly, Lev finally pulls away from our kiss and gets up to go to the bathroom and get us a warm washcloth. He comes back and cleans us both up, then tosses the cloth into the hamper and hands me a water. We both drink a bit, and he lies down next to me and lifts the covers over us.

And I settle against him for my favorite part of the night. Lev wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head, and I feel so good, so comfortable and loved.

“Happy Anniversary, little lycan. I love you as much today as I did when I saw you at the Exchange for the first time again, what—ten years ago?”

“Yeah.” I nuzzle into him further. “I’m so glad we found each other again. Happy anniversary. I love you, Lev.”

I stretch up and meet him for one final, deep good night kiss, and then we snuggle back in together, so close that there’s no space at all between us. I start to fade off to sleep with a smile on my face, content and loved.

This man is everything I ever wanted and clearly all that I forever needed.

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Acknowledgements

Note from the author:

Beautiful beings, I did it! I wrote my first book. This has been a dream of mine for a long time. Writing stories in middle school and high school, I always wanted to be a published author and here I am!

To you, the readers, thank you for choosing to pick up Needed You. I think it's always nerve wracking to put yourself out there and share what's special to you, hoping that others also find something in your characters and message. I appreciate you all taking a chance on me and I hope that you enjoyed Lev and Dare as much as I do.

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Mom, thank you for reading. I hope you didn't blush or say my full name in exasperation too many times.

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About The Author

KJ was born and raised on the east coast in Pennsylvania. After college, she moved a little closer to the city but kept the sanctity of open fields and wooded backyards. She currently lives with her husband, daughter and cats. KJ loves coffee, water (boring!), reading and watching documentaries and shows about murder.

KJ loves to tell a good story, and believes that being nosey is a part of life. As long as she can remember, KJ made up stories and scenarios in her head and would play them out in all of their glorious drama.

This is her debut novel and she is so excited to be sharing these characters with you. She's also grateful that you are taking a chance on her.

Stay up to date and communicate with KJ Crawford through her socials via TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook

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Hang with me. The best is yet to come!

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