



CARTE  
BLANCHE

A LOVE'S LANDSCAPES STORY

*nash summers*

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## CARTE BLANCHE

**By Nash Summers**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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# CARTE BLANCHE

By Nash Summers

## Photo Description

Close-up of two men, both in monochromatic blues and high-contrast lighting. The man on the left is showing his side profile with his eyes closed, pressing his forehead to the other man's cheek. The man on the right is looking toward the viewer with striking, blue eyes.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I've never needed anyone. People are a vulnerability I don't need or want. But then there was him. I couldn't get him out of my head, he was a distraction I didn't need. No matter how much I pushed him away, he kept coming back. One kiss and I know I'll never let him go.*

*Sincerely,*

*Amanda*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** disabilities, mental illness, hurt/comfort, slow burn, tearjerker, self-growth

**Word Count:** 20,655

# **CARTE BLANCHE**

**By Nash Summers**

## Chapter 1

I could hear it laughing at me from across the apartment, hiding beneath the kitchen cupboard. It laughed and taunted even as I lay in bed staring at the old stucco ceiling, trying to ignore its jeering. The sound resonated from the hollow space under the sink, ricocheted against the walls of the hallway, eventually finding its way into my bedroom and straight into my consciousness.

“*You need me,*” it called out. And I did. That truth was painfully hard to swallow. I did need it, but I wished with every ounce of myself that it wasn't true. I didn't want to think of it, I didn't even want to remember it had ever existed in my life. But it did, and that was my pathetic reality.

I was exhausted, completely vacant inside. I barely remembered the last time I'd slept without it calling to me, begging me for attention. I wanted to continue to lie in bed, ignoring it, pretending it didn't exist, but I wasn't that naive. We both knew that I'd come for it eventually, no matter how tired I was, no matter how deeply I detested it.

My heart sped as I tried to imagine what my life would be like if I remained in bed until I was physically unable to stay awake for another moment. The mere thought of ignoring it until the desperate need passed was exhilarating in an entirely different way. I wondered if I would feel a sense of pride or completion.

I pulled the sheets off of my body, tossing them to the side of the mattress. My feet dragged across the floor as I made my way into the dimly-lit kitchen of my apartment. The light flickered on, illuminating the blankness all around me. The tiles felt like dry ice against my bare knees while I crouched down in front of the kitchen sink. I pulled open the wooden cabinet door, clutching the knob so tightly my fingers turned white. There it was, staring at me from behind the dish detergent and new boxes of rubber gloves. *Bleach*, it read, as if the word was used as an insult or a curse. The very word could send shivers down my spine, completing my feeling of desolation.

A new pair of yellow rubber gloves were extracted from the box then pulled tightly onto my thin hands. I wondered when my hands had become so thin. I tried to remember if I'd eaten that day, but I couldn't distinguish that day from the day before or any of the days before that.

I removed my accomplice from beneath the sink and stuck it under my arm. The main washroom was just down the hall—I decided to start there. Sighing

deeply, I made my way out of the kitchen and down the hall. I flicked on the light. From that angle, everything looked perfect. It looked white and clean and perfect, but I couldn't take the chance that it wasn't. As I pulled a cloth out from under the cabinet and undid the cap on the bottle of bleach, that same familiar, clinically comforting smell filled the small space. Suddenly, I didn't feel like the task was quite as daunting. I felt like I was home.

Hours later, my hands ached and my knees were raw, but I could finally sleep, thinking of the infinite whiteness of my prison.

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I'd read the first two chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee exactly 2843 times. I knew the first two chapters of the book better than I knew the color of my own eyes, better than I knew my favorite food. My father had given me the book when I was fourteen years old and told me to read it because it might make me a better person. The first time I began reading it, I was sixteen, and I thumbed through those first two chapters gently, trying to absorb each and every word through the tips of my fingers. I wanted my father to think I was becoming a better person. Unfortunately, as time wore on, I developed a habit of reading the first two chapters, and only the first two chapters, every morning at the same time. If a day passed when I was physically unable to read the first two chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I'd suffer the entire rest of the day. This happened a few times when I was younger and my mother had *misplaced* the book. I wouldn't eat, I wouldn't move, I couldn't function until I'd had my daily dose of Scout and Atticus Finch.

"Why don't you want to read any further than the second chapter?" my mother would ask me. "Don't you want to know what happens next?"

I'd think about it each time she asked me, wondering if that particular time I would feel differently.

"No," I'd reply. "I'm too afraid it won't work out well."

That should've been foreshadowing for my dim future, but I don't recall my mother paying me much attention at all during those years of my life. My mother was too distracted by her constant misery.

So each morning at 10:12 A.M., I'd sit in the same reading chair my father used to sit in, and carefully make my way through the first couple of chapters in my book. The chair was old, upholstered in some blue and red plaid pattern and made with some kind of itchy fabric. The chair was the only thing in my apartment that I never felt compelled to clean obsessively. Regular cleaning,



sure, but any time I thought of reupholstering the chair, or even having it dry cleaned, I'd feel sick.

The night prior had been difficult on me, working on such a small amount of sleep and cleaning my entire apartment from top to bottom for the third time that day. Some days I'd only need to clean it once. Other days, like yesterday, I needed to clean it more.

I finished reading the two chapters, then made my way into the second bedroom, which I used as an office. I sat down at my desk and woke my computer from its sleeping state.

The desk was made of some sort of hard plastic that I'd ordered online and assembled myself after it was delivered. It was white and only comprised of five parts in total, making it simple for me to piece together on my own. The room was small and had one window that was usually covered with simple fabric blinds. I didn't have any curtains in my apartment because they were too difficult and time-consuming to wash as frequently as I needed. The floor was laminate, something new my landlord had installed a few years earlier. I kept it in impeccable condition. The walls had been painted white when I'd first moved in years ago. My landlord had said that I could paint them any color I wanted, but I didn't want them to be any color; I wanted them to be white. I wanted to be able to stare at their white nothingness, their perpetual lack of color, and feel a misplaced sense of cleanliness.

I had around an hour before my daily webcam chat with Amanda, a pink-haired girl who blew gum bubbles as big as her head and always talked to me like I had the I.Q. of a tin can. Amanda was the closest thing I had to a friend, but I had never really considered her one. I've never needed anyone. People were a vulnerability I didn't need or want. Still, Amanda had her own personal set of charms that added to her allure. She had the same types of *issues* I had, so each day we'd tell one another all about them and feed off of each other's negativity. It was a vicious cycle, but it was my cycle, and it worked.

I opened a web browser and started to do some research for work. One of my clients had taken me up on my suggestion to travel to Amsterdam in March for the annual Keukenhof Flower Festival. The festival starts off with a forty-kilometer parade route along the main roads from Noordwijk to Haarlem, concluding around noon, in perfect time for an afternoon lunch. I'd convinced her to rent a bicycle with her husband and pedal to Weesp, which was around ten miles from the center of the city. They'd be able to cycle along the Amsterdam-Rhine canal and enjoy the countryside views along the way.

She told me they'd always appreciated simplistic beauty in nature, and that Holland sounded like somewhere they'd be interested in travelling. It was an anniversary surprise for her husband, so I planned out the most perfect trip imaginable, from the countryside villas, to the restaurants that would have her husband's favorite dish.

I was good at my job as a travel advisor and planner; customers usually appreciated my attention to detail and obsessive nature to plan everything and confirm twice that things were in order.

After confirming with the hotel that my customer and her husband would be checking into their first night in Holland, I stretched my arms high over my head and looked at the clock. It read 11:38 A.M., which meant I had two minutes before ringing Amanda. I sat in my chair for those two minutes, wringing the hem of my T-shirt with my fingers.

After those two minutes had passed, I flicked on my webcam, sent the invite to Amanda, and waited. Her picture popped up on the screen in a little square box. She had her hair tied in pigtails, which looked cute despite her being in her late twenties. Her eyes were lined with black and her jaw was moving rhythmically as she smacked the gum in her mouth. Not only did Amanda consistently look like a character from a cartoon, she also played the part quite well. Whereas my apartment was always spotlessly clean, hers always appeared to be in a state of disarray. She listened to bands I'd never heard of and knew odd lingo that sounded ridiculous even to younger ears.

"What a surprise," Amanda said to me from the little square window her face was in. This was how Amanda had greeted me every day for the past two years. At first, I thought she did it to be funny and ironic, but over time it became somewhat of an endearment, for her at least.

"Hi, Amanda," I said.

"Wow, you don't look so good, boss," she told me, leaning closer to her computer monitor to get a better look at me. I could see myself in another box on my screen. She was right, I looked exhausted. My brown hair lay flat and lifeless against my head, looking too long and beginning to slightly curl at the ends. My bright blue eyes, which had once been called striking, looked dull and bloodshot from carrying heavy bags beneath them. My skin was much paler than I'd ever noticed it being before; even my cheeks had an awkward yellow hue to them. I looked on the outside exactly how I felt on the inside.

It seemed like a lifetime ago when people used to call me beautiful. Men and women would want to touch me, be near me, maybe to absorb whatever

kind of beauty they'd once seen in me. But as the years passed by, even still being in my early twenties, I looked old and tired, like life hadn't been easy on me and I'd gone down fighting.

"I had to clean three times yesterday," I told Amanda. She always understood when I confessed my sins to her.

"Three?" she asked. "Wow. Yesterday I heard a bird fly against my window and I had a panic attack in the corner of my room. It lasted for the better part of forty minutes. My new psychiatrist gave me these breathing exercises; I think they've been helping. Maybe you should try them."

"Maybe," I said, not really listening to her. She continued to tell me about her day while I stared at the screen, watching her talk to me but not really seeing anything at all.

When our daily conversation concluded, I mentally prepared myself to grab my bleach from under the sink and get ready for an afternoon of cleaning. But just as I logged off my computer, I heard banging coming from outside my apartment door. It sounded like someone was taking a wrecking ball to the walls or hosting an African mammal parade.

I continued to listen, a little stunned, because banging noises never came from the hallway. Sweet Mrs. Smith, who lived directly across from my apartment, was a quiet widow who always kept to herself and didn't favor company, much the same as myself. She'd probably never made that much noise in her life.

Another bang and a crash were followed by a few swear words. With my heart beating almost through my shirt, I tiptoed out of my office and made my way slowly down the hall. I stood in front of my door to look through the peephole. Standing right outside my door were three men in plain view. Two of them were carrying a sofa, some dingy old thing, and the other was doing a poor job of navigating for them with two large boxes in his hands. One of the sofa movers said something to the man with boxes in his hands, and the man with boxes suddenly dropped them, causing another bang, and began laughing. When he laughed, he looked like someone people would watch a documentary on just for a glimpse into his beautiful life.

He was taller than me, more muscular, with hair a darker brown than mine and tan lines visible on his arms. His golden skin was covered in sun freckles, and he had slight crinkles at the corners of his eyes. He must laugh a lot. His clothing looked worn and duller in some areas from sun exposure, but it didn't

detract from his appeal. He appeared to be moving things into the apartment right across the hall from mine. Unless Mrs. Smith had a long-lost grandson, I knew that he was going to be my new neighbor.

I could feel the anxiety rising up inside me, like a fire starting at my toes and making its way toward the ceiling. This was the kind of change I hated, the kind I had no control over. Backing away from the door, I tried to calm myself. I thought that perhaps it wouldn't be so terrible. Perhaps he'd keep to himself and leave me alone.

Just then I heard the sound of his laughter again, and for some reason it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I turned to get my gloves and bleach from beneath the kitchen sink.

I knew it was going to be a long night.

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## Chapter 2

Someone was knocking at my door. I glanced at the clock on my office wall, then the one on my computer screen, then the one sitting on the side of my desk. It was 3:02 P.M. and I wasn't expecting anyone. In fact, I was never expecting anyone. I sat in my chair completely unsure of what to do with myself. Do I go answer the door to a complete stranger? No, even the thought of doing that made me want to vomit. Perhaps if I ignored it, it would go away.

The knocking started again, making me jump slightly in my seat. Then someone started hollering, nothing panicked, just inquiring. I decided that if this person was so determined, I would at least make a short appearance. After all, what if the building was on fire? What if someone had died in the hallway and this person needed the telephone to call an ambulance?

I padded my way through the hall and to my front door. I got up on my toes and leaned against the door to look through the peephole. It was the same man from a few days ago, the one with the smile. Instantly my heart sped up. Why was he at my front door? What did he want? What happened to nice, quiet Mrs. Smith, and why couldn't this man leave me alone?

He knocked again. He was definitely adamant. I didn't think he'd go away unless I answered the door and he resolved whatever he needed from me.

I undid the four locks on the door and slowly, carefully, pulled the door open. Then I watched him smile as I gazed up at his face, wondering if my heart was about to leap right out of my chest and into his hands.

"Hi, I'm Devin," he said. His hand stretched out toward me. I just stood there, latching on to the door and avoiding eye contact. After a few uncomfortable moments, he pulled his hand back and shoved it into his pocket.

"I just moved in next door. Thought I'd come by to say hello. Mrs. Smith told me you work from home and don't leave your apartment too much, so I figured you'd be home."

He looked me up and down, probably taking in the small thing I was. I was wearing a faded pair of blue jeans and an old white T-shirt. My bare feet felt clammy on the floor, but the coolness of it made me feel grounded.

"What happened to Mrs. Smith?" I asked him quietly.

"Her kids decided to move her into a nursing home, I guess. She was having trouble keeping up with the apartment all by herself."

I drew in a deep breath. This Devin person wanted to be friends with me. I couldn't have that. He was too distracting to look at with his bright brown eyes and lopsided smile.

"Sorry, I'm not really in the market for new friends," I told him.

He threw his head back and laughed as if I'd just made a joke. I couldn't help but stare at him.

"I didn't catch your name," Devin said.

"Jude," I told him.

"Hey, Jude," Devin said in a singsong voice.

"Yes, very funny."

He just smiled at me. I wondered if this man ever stopped smiling—Devin, the insistent neighbor, consisting mainly of unwarranted smiles and a multitude of fresh tan lines.

"Well, if you ever need anything, I'm right across the hall, okay? Even just to hang out," Devin told me.

"Yes, all right, thank you," I said to him as I slowly eased the door closed. Once it was finally shut, I took a deep breath. I could hear him singing "Hey Jude" in the hallway and then the click of his door.

My heart felt heavy for some reason, and I decided the best way to remedy that was to clean my small kitchen until the familiar scent of bleach stung my nostrils and made my tired eyes water.

I extracted the bleach and gloves from under the kitchen sink along with a sponge and two white cloths. I got to work, starting with the tops of the cabinets and working my way down, shelf by shelf, until I was scrubbing the floor on my hands and knees, pressing my fingers into the thin cracks between the tiles.

By the time I was finished cleaning, I felt much better. Cleaning was my therapy, always able to calm me down when my mind started running wild. Devin had sent me into a frenzy. There was something about him that I couldn't quite shake, no matter how hard I tried. Something about his constant grin and the crinkles around his eyes. Definitely something, but I had no idea what.

“Hello, Mr. Howard,” I said into my Bluetooth headset. It was around 5:00 P.M. and I’d been working all morning to make sure everything had been set in stone for his upcoming trip. “Yes, I just confirmed your flights for the day after tomorrow as well as the Japan Rail Pass that we’ve purchased. The hostels are all also confirmed so everything is taken care of. You just have to make it to the airport on time.”

Mr. Howard said a few thankful words to me before hanging up from the call. Most of my clients were particular, like me, about confirming their bookings and making sure everything was going according to plan. My client, Mr. Howard, had been working with me for years, and I’d always envied the amount he was able to travel. He’d go to beautiful places like Turkey, Japan, or Germany, whenever he was infected with the travel bug. This was his third trip to Japan and he wanted to try something different, something new, something exciting.

I pulled up a web browser and looked for imagery of cherry blossom trees. They were in full bloom by mid to late April and some ran the most beautiful colors of pinks and fuchsias. The trees hung so tall and wide, they could envelop hundreds of people in a hug. I wondered what it would be like to pluck a flower from a tree and smell it. I’d read online that it smelled very mildly like cherries, but more like a fragrant rose. I couldn’t even remember if I had ever smelled a rose.

For a few fleeting moments, I was jealous of Mr. Howard. I wanted to see the cherry blossoms bloom, I wanted to take the bullet train through the cities, I wanted to see the world through eyes other than my own.

I knew it would never happen. I knew that I’d be in this apartment, or another one much like it, for a long, long time. My fear kept me here. My fear of everything and everyone kept me in this small, dark bubble of my life.

A knock sounded at my door, breaking me out of my thoughts. I glanced at the clock on my wall, the clock on my computer screen, and the clock sitting on my desk. I wasn’t expecting anyone, but somehow I knew who it would be.

I stood up and made my way down the hall, silently cursing Mrs. Smith’s kids for putting her into a nursing home.

I undid the four locks on my door and slid it open. Standing in front of me was Devin, looking mighty proud of himself in his board shorts, bare feet, and tank top with a picture of a sun wearing sunglasses on it.

“Hey, Jude,” he said. “I made way too much food for dinner and I was hoping you’d join me or at least take some of it off my hands. It’s macaroni casserole.”

I stared at him, hugging the door to my side like it was my lifeline. When had I ever given him the impression that I was okay with him just stopping by whenever he wanted to use my body as an organic garbage disposal?

Suddenly, he reached out his hand to touch the side of my face. I stumbled backwards, flinching before his hand was close enough to touch me. I stood a few feet away from him, inside my apartment, probably looking like a deer caught in headlights.

“Wow, I’m sorry,” Devin said, holding his hands up. “I didn’t mean to scare you. You just had a bit of fluff on your cheek.”

I inhaled heavily, my heart beating fast. I pressed the heel of my hand over the skin covering my heart and looked at Devin.

“No, it’s fine. Sorry. I just don’t like to be touched. Or to have someone stand so close to me,” I told him.

“Oh,” he replied. “Well, uh, here, how about this?” He turned around and opened his apartment door wide and sat just inside his doorway. Devin’s back was pressed against one side of the frame and his bare feet were pressed against the other side as he looked up at me.

“Why are you here, again?” I asked him, trying to get rid of him.

“I made too much dinner, remember? And when I saw you the other day I just thought you looked like you could use a good meal. Thought that maybe you don’t like cooking or get too busy to eat, so I figured I’d see if you wanted to join me for dinner.”

“If I close my door, you’ll just knock again, won’t you?” I asked him.

He crossed his arms over his flat stomach and laughed. “Yeah, probably.”

I sighed and wiped my hands over my face. I decided if he knew how much of a freak I was, he’d finally leave me alone. I opened my door just wide enough to sit in the frame on the cool floor, with my legs crossed underneath me. The hem of my shorts rode up a little on my thin thighs and I momentarily thought I caught Devin’s gaze watching.

The carpet lining the hallway between our apartments had some old, vintage pattern of golden swirls and black dots on a dark red background. I’d never



taken much time to notice the carpet or the off-white color of the hallway walls, but at that time, my eyes seemed to keep drifting down to the carpet instead of looking at Devin.

“I’m not hungry,” I told him.

“Okay, that’s fine. Then how about you tell me about yourself? You’re a bit of a mystery,” Devin asked me, sounding nonchalant as if I could summarize myself in a few short words.

“Well, I have severe OCD and social anxiety disorder. I was diagnosed when I was fifteen and every year I get worse. I don’t like people, I don’t like outdoors, and I don’t like trying new things. I have a routine and when my routine is interrupted, like you seem to enjoy doing, I get extremely stressed and it becomes difficult for me to focus for hours afterwards.”

“Huh.”

I waited a few more moments to see if he had anything else to add. He just sat there, looking at me even as I watched the swirls on the carpeted floor. He didn’t even sound surprised when I’d told him, not like seeing me and assuming I had an anxiety disorder was much of a stretch.

“Huh?” I finally asked, looking up at him. “That’s it?”

“Well, you didn’t really answer my question,” Devin replied.

“What do you mean I didn’t answer your question? I told you everything about me. I told you something personal.” My jaw was slack and I was openly staring at him, more than a little shocked by his response.

“I asked about you. Your first and only response was to tell me about your disorder. You aren’t your disorder. You told me about all the things you don’t like and none of the things you do like. I just find it hard to believe someone like you is completely comprised of dislikes and not a single like.”

I blinked at him. I had no idea how to reply to that. I told him something huge about myself, something that made most peoples’ faces change and contort in sympathy. They usually pitied me when I told them of the weight I carried around each day. But not Devin. He looked at me like he was expecting more out of me, as if there was more. I didn’t remember the last time I’d talked to anyone about anything besides my disorders. It caught me off guard and made me feel vulnerable.

“I’ll tell you a little about myself then, how about that?” Devin grinned wide at me. “My full name is Devin Kidd, and I’m the oldest of three, with two

younger sisters. I'm a swim instructor for children and have been for four years, my favorite food is broccoli because I'm odd like that, I drive a piece-of-shit Taurus that rarely starts without a fight, and my favorite color is the same blue as your eyes."

My eyes narrowed at him but he just threw his head back and laughed. "What? It is my favorite color. I'm not lying."

Somehow, I couldn't help but smile at him. Devin was so full of life; he was shiny where I was dull, he was vibrant where I was bland. He seemed to make the world around him a little brighter, even if I didn't necessarily mind living in the dark.

"My name is Jude Allen. I work from home as an online travel planner. I don't have a favorite color," I said.

"Well, Jude Allen, it's very nice to meet you. Maybe one day you'll even shake my hand."

"I doubt it," I replied. He laughed.

"You're something else, Jude."

"Listen Devin, you seem like a perfectly fine person, but I don't need or want another person in my life, even a friend. I just don't have the space."

"Perfectly fine, huh?"

"Yes, perfectly fine."

"You could make the space, if you tried," he said.

I sighed heavily, suddenly feeling tired. I stood up and brushed some of the gathered lint from the carpet off my shorts.

"I'll see you around," I told him, then retreated into my apartment and began closing the heavy, white door.

"You bet," he said, sounding happier than I thought he should. If I knew Devin Kidd at all, I'd say he sounded like he had a trick up his sleeve. But that was just it, I didn't know him and I didn't want to. I kept reminding myself that I didn't want to as I made my way to the kitchen and opened the cabinet door under the sink.

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### Chapter 3

I heard a solitary bang against my door. Then, a few seconds later, another one. I looked at all three of the clocks I had in my office and sighed. Devin's constant reappearances during different times of the day were weighing on my nerves. If he was going to bother me, I'd at least prefer he do it at the same time each day, but I'm sure he knew that and was annoying me at random times to mix up my patterns.

Another loud bang against the door. I considered ignoring him and going back to work. I didn't have much left to do for the day; I'd spent a good amount of time that morning researching the most inexpensive flights directly to Venice.

Gorgeous pictures of the canals and handsome gondoliers had put me in a slump, causing me to stare at my computer screen for hours and imagine a life where I could be one of those delighted travellers venturing down the cobblestone sidewalks with a smile on my face.

A fourth loud bang dragged me out of my daydream. I left my chair and stopped momentarily at the bathroom to look at my hair. I had no idea why, since I didn't really care what Devin thought of how I looked.

Moments later, I was unlocking the locks on my door and opening it only to see Devin sitting in his doorway with a big grin on his face. His hair looked messed, like he'd just woken up, and his sleeveless shirt showed off his sculpted arms and T-shirt tan lines that circled his biceps. His shorts were old, ratty-looking denim things that looked like they'd lived a previous life as a washcloth. He also had a large bouncy ball in his hands. I didn't understand how he could be doing the most pointless things and look so proud of himself, like he'd just run a marathon and finished in first place.

"Yes?" I asked him, trying to look annoyed as I held the door open with one of my hands.

"Have a seat, stay a while," Devin replied, still smiling.

I made a big deal of sighing and rolling my eyes before sitting on the ground and leaning on my doorframe. I knew that he wouldn't leave me alone unless I entertained him at least for a few minutes.

"Look what I have," he said, holding the large bouncy ball up with one hand. It was clear rubber with swirls of dark and light blue through it,

reminding me of the waves I'd seen pictures of just off the beaches of Jamaica. The tendrils of color looked lovely enough that if I didn't know it was a bouncy ball, I'd believe it to be blown glass.

"And?" I tried not to fidget or bite my nails.

"So, if you don't feel comfortable with me too close to you, I can use this to knock on your door without physically coming over there. Plus, we can use it kind of like a conch shell and take turns using it to talk."

"Why are you so intent on talking to me? Don't you have someone else you can bother?"

Devin laughed. "Well, I guess. But none of them are quite as charming as you. Or polite."

He rolled the bouncy ball over to me and sat there, staring at me with big eyes, waiting expectantly.

"So, uh, what am I supposed to say?" I asked.

"Tell me something about yourself. And make it good."

"You certainly are demanding," I said. He just kept smiling at me.

I glanced past him into his apartment. Mountains of cardboard boxes were lined against his walls with a few of them open and junk spewing out of the tops like a broken-down wood chipper. His apartment looked very similar to mine in layout, but that's where the similarities ended. He had clothes thrown over furniture and a stand-up mirror, and junk laying everywhere on the Berber carpet floor. He had an old calendar up on the wall that had expired last year and a jar of spinach dip open on the counter with the lid off.

I swallowed hard. Just seeing Devin's apartment in such disarray was making my skin itch. I wanted to leave. I wanted to go back into my apartment to clean and clean and wash everything twice as badly as I normally did. But something in his crooked smile and the way his eyes crinkled when he watched me made me want to stay, just this one time.

"Well," I said swallowing hard, "I like cleanliness. I think like is an understatement. Things need to be clean for me to feel comfortable. Very clean. I clean my apartment at least once a day, sometimes three times a day. I go through more bleach than I go through food, and nothing ever feels clean enough for me."

"Do germs make you uncomfortable?" Devin asked.

“No,” I replied. “Not really. It’s not that; it’s just the overall cleanliness. I’m not afraid of contamination or germs like some other people with OCD. I think it’s just a ritual I have that somehow is linked to cleaning.”

“Have you always needed things clean? Even when you were a kid?”

I thought about it for a moment, looking at a water-damaged spot on the ceiling in the hallway. “No, maybe when I was in middle school it started. Although, growing up, I remember our house being remarkably clean. My dad liked things that way.”

“And does your dad still like things that way?” he asked. I rolled the bouncy ball over to him, and it hit him in the knee.

“Your turn,” I said.

He paused for a moment to look at me with an odd expression on his face, then picked up the ball and started bouncing it in front of him.

“Well, I’m a swimming instructor for kids, usually around the ages of three to twelve. I love kids; I blame it on growing up the oldest in a very active, loving family. I went through training to get my lifeguard certification and then it kind of progressed from there with more schooling and instructing classes. And I love the water. The ocean, rivers, lakes, swimming pools, doesn’t matter, as long as it’s water, I’m in love. My two younger sisters hate the water so our family likes to make jokes that I was adopted, but I’ve got my mother’s nose, so they can’t fool me.

“And the kids, Jude, they look at you with these big, bright, trusting eyes like they’d leap into your arms at a moment’s notice because they know you are there to catch them. It’s one of the most amazing feelings in the world, having someone look at you like that.

“How about you? Is Jude Allen a merman in disguise?”

Devin liked to talk with his hands. He used his arms and hands to make motions in the air and it was hard not to fall into whatever he was telling you and believe it like it was true to you.

I’d become so engulfed listening to him, I’d missed what he said to me.

“Jude?” Devin asked softly.

“What? Oh, sorry,” I said, stumbling over my words.

I turned my face to the ground and stared at the carpet, feeling the warmth heat up my cheeks. I could see through my eyelashes that he was looking at me, and he probably knew that I was looking right back at him.

"I was asking if you liked swimming. Our complex has a pool, you know. You ever been?"

"Nope," I replied, shaking my head. "I'm not very good with public places, remember? I don't think I've been swimming since I was in my teens."

"So what do you like doing?" Devin asked before rolling the ball over to me. I picked it up and wrapped my thin hands almost the entire way around it.

"I like my job."

"Travel planner, right?"

"Right. I do a lot of research online. It's an easy job to do, working from home. I get to look at all these beautiful pictures of places that I know my clients will go. Today I researched the Yuan-Xiao Festival, the Chinese Lantern Festival, where they have firecracker launches and carnivals and a parade.

"I can't imagine being around that many people, but for how amazing it looks, it might be worth it."

"Why don't you go?" Devin asked me.

"I could never go! It would be one panic attack after another for me. China is packed full of people; the people who live there barely have any space, let alone space for tourists."

"Maybe someone from your family would go with you for support."

"No," I replied. "There's just me and my mother, and she'd never condone me going. She knows about my conditions and my limitations. She doesn't encourage me to do anything that will put me under any sort of stress, in fact, she says that I should avoid it."

I looked over at Devin and he seemed deep in thought. He was looking at the rubber ball in my hands and I wondered what he saw. Maybe, for him, the bouncy ball was like a crystal ball and he was peering into it and thinking of his future, or worse yet, mine. Maybe he thought I was a charity case—his poor neighbor across the hall who he felt bad for and decided to try to talk to so he didn't find me some day hanging from my impeccably clean shower rod. Not that he could ever bypass the four locks on my door.

"I should go," I said, standing up and dusting off my shorts.

Devin just stared up at me from his spot on the floor. It seemed sometime during our conversation, I'd managed to pull the smile off his face, and the thought of doing that made my stomach hurt.

“You don’t have to go yet, Jude,” Devin said to me quietly.

I bounced the ball on the carpeted hallway floor and he caught it in his hands. “Thanks for listening, Devin.”

I went inside my apartment and gently closed the door. I relocked all four locks, double-checking them to make sure they were secure, then leaned my back against the apartment door with a gentle thud.

I sighed heavily and closed my eyes, wondering if later Devin would be able to smell the bleach from across the hall.

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My apartment was not big. My father’s old reading chair sat in the far back corner of the living room, right next to the white bookshelf. Next to the bookshelf, hanging on the wall, was a large picture of a lake with the Rocky Mountains in the horizon, the colors of spring reflecting off the water’s surface. A client of mine had taken the picture from Banff and sent me a large print. I had an elegant glass frame delivered and hung it right on the stark white wall, somewhere I’d see it every day. It caused me a lot of anxiety those first few weeks, wondering how much care it would take to clean it regularly, making sure all the streaks and dust weren’t visible on the glass. But as time passed, I became accustomed to it, allowing myself the simple pleasure of its colorful presence on my dull wall.

I owned a plain white sofa that was uncomfortable and boxy and sat in the center of the room facing the outside window. Sometimes if I was feeling brave, I’d draw the blinds and look outside at the people walking by the park across the street from my apartment building. I rarely felt brave, so I could barely remember what the park looked like anymore.

My bedroom was plain. A queen-sized bed frame was pressed against the far wall, housing the mattress and white cotton sheets. I’d take the sheets off and wash them each day, first thing in the morning. I was lucky enough to have laundry in my suite. It was a requirement when I was apartment hunting.

The carpet was some plain off-white color, but at least it was only in the bedroom. Laminate was in the rest of the apartment, and I was thankful for that for cleaning purposes. Even having carpet in the bedroom made me feel mentally exhausted.

I was on my hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor with a new cloth. No matter how many times I scrubbed one spot on the tiled floor, it never

seemed to be quite clean enough. It was toying with my sanity, because I knew it was clean, I knew it was spotless and perfect and couldn't possibly be any cleaner, but still I felt a tug somewhere deep inside me, telling me to scrub harder, scrub more.

I thought of the first time I'd ever scrubbed the floor. It was back when I was much younger, after my father left. My mother stopped cleaning. There were piles of dishes in the sink, dust on all the plant leaves, and the floor was dirty with shoe scuffs and mud. I remembered standing in the kitchen doorway and listening to my mother crying down the hall, thinking that maybe if I cleaned up the kitchen just the way Dad liked it, he'd come home, and Mom would stop crying. So I found an assortment of cleaning supplies under the kitchen counter, right where I knew Mom kept them, and got down on my knees and scrubbed everything clean. That first time, I wasn't smart enough to wear gloves, and my hands were red and raw and felt like they were burning. But after the first time I cleaned everything in sight, from top to bottom, I felt a sense of calm, like if I kept trying my best at this, to make it perfect for Mom and Dad, then everything would be all right. If I just kept cleaning, kept things spotless and perfect, maybe Dad would come home.

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## Chapter 4

After that first day that Devin had knocked on my door using the ocean-colored bouncy ball, we continued meeting almost every day. We'd sit in our corresponding doorways and pass the ball back and forth, talking about ourselves and learning about one another. In the beginning, I'd tried time after time to avoid him or just ignore him, but he'd continue to bang that bouncy ball against my door until I finally opened up.

I began to look forward to it each day, even though I didn't know what time Devin would finally make an appearance. I tried to let the randomness become comfortable, and after a while, it began to get easier.

One day, Devin asked me if I liked to read. At first, I was hesitant to tell him about the worn, old book I read each morning. I was worried that he'd find me even more odd than he probably already did, but for some reason, it was difficult for me to keep things from Devin.

"I read the first two chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* every morning at the same time. Just the first two chapters. It started in my teens and now I can't stop and I can't progress," I told him.

The next day when he bounced the ball over to knock on my door and I answered, he was sitting on the ground with his own copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in his hands. He told me that he thought it might be fun to read it together.

At first, I'd declined, once politely, then frantically the following times. He just sat there and listened to me rant about the horrors I feared would happen to my beloved Scout through the progression of her story. Eventually, Devin just shrugged and smiled at me. He told me that if the book didn't have a happy ending, he'd make one up for me and never tell me otherwise. I laughed.

When he read to me, I leaned my head against the frame of the door and watched him. I watched his lips move, his fingertips touch the fresh pages of the book. His book looked much less used than my copy, and I wondered if he'd bought the book specifically to read with me. Sometimes he'd stop reading and look up at me to make sure I was paying attention, and I always was. It would be impossible not to.

After he'd read aloud the first two chapters and began on the third, my heart started to race. I felt wild and alive, all because the man across the hallway was

reading to me about an adventure. I knew how ridiculous it was, but I couldn't make my heart calm down. The way Devin pronounced the name Atticus like *Adicus* was enthralling, and the way his tongue flicked over his lips every so often was even more intoxicating.

The following morning at 10:12 A.M. when I picked up the book, I thought of the words flowing from Devin's lips and the way he'd laughed at me when I began fidgeting and leaned forward to be closer to him, even by a fraction. I still sat in my dad's old chair and flipped through the pages, but it felt like none of the words really mattered to me. They were all jumbled and didn't matter unless Devin was speaking them. When I'd told Devin that I'd begun skimming through the first two chapters and once or twice even forgot to read them until later in the afternoon, he grinned at me widely. He told me that I should be proud of myself, and for the first time in many years, I was.

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Every few weeks, I went through all of my books and reorganized them according to their cover color, alphabetically, publisher name, or publishing date. I rotated between all four forms of organization bi-monthly, without fail. This process had become very important to me years prior, and I'd never once missed reorganizing them.

But early the following evening, when I'd heard the knock on the front door, I'd set the books down on a side table and left them there, unorganized, without a second thought. I opened the door and sat down on the floor, waiting for Devin to tell me why he had a big smile on his face.

"Hey, you," he said, and I felt my cheeks start to heat.

"Hey, Devin."

"I made something for you. Well, kind of. I made too much of something for me and now I'm passing some on to you."

Devin reached off to his side and withdrew a skateboard, then set it down in front of him. The grip tape on the top was peeling in two of the four corners and one of the wheels was a brighter color and looked to be in newer condition than the rest.

I peered down at the worn skateboard and then back up at him. "If you think I'm going to get on that and go skateboarding with you, you're sorely mistaken."

He laughed and shook his head. On the floor next to him were a few plates that he pulled over and set on the skateboard in front of him. There was a small

plate of pasta with a green sauce on it, a dinner roll, a side plate of ceasar salad, and shiny silver cutlery. He shifted and reached into his pocket to pull out an electronic, battery-operated tea light candle, which he flicked on and set on the skateboard near the salad.

Devin gently rolled the skateboard over to me, and I held out my hands to align it in front of me. I looked up at him, and the expression on my face made him laugh. He then pulled out his own few plates of food and set them on the ground in front of him before he began eating.

I looked at him, more than a little surprised. He'd obviously gone to a bit of trouble for this. The thought of him thinking of me in his spare time made me feel uncomfortable. I'd formed a comfortable relationship with him, this person across the hall, and I wanted to keep it that way. I didn't want to further our relationship by exchanging small gifts like prepared meals, I wanted to keep him at arm's length until he finally grew tired of me, so that I could go back to my normal, practical routine.

He watched me with that same, stubborn expression on his face, the one that let me know that he wouldn't let this issue go without a fight. So I picked up the fork and gently stabbed a few pieces of pasta and then popped them into my mouth.

"This is good," I told him before eating another bite. And it was.

"Thanks," Devin said. "I looked up a recipe online, but as I was boiling the pasta, my sister called so I asked for her cooking expertise. While I was trying to write down the recipe she was giving me, I completely overcooked the first batch of pasta and had to toss it. I chalk it up to practice."

"Oh, well, thanks for the food," I said quietly. He looked up at me and smiled.

I ate almost everything he'd put on the skateboard, and I felt more full than I had in a long time. I told Devin that I'd wash all the plates for him and return them the following day, insisting that it was the least I could do to thank him.

The next day I surprised Devin, and myself, by making a few sandwiches and putting them on the newly cleaned plates and sending them over to him via skateboard. Sandwiches were the most extravagant things I could make, given that each week I ordered all my food online and rarely ever ordered fresh produce. He acted like I'd just put a chunk of the world on a silver platter and gifted it to him. I could barely focus that entire meal because Devin kept going

on about how good the plain peanut butter and jam sandwich was, and because Devin had a little bit of jam in the corner of his mouth.

We carried on our routine almost every day by making one another some sort of food. Devin's meals were always better, likely because he actually went outside to the grocery store to get fresh ingredients. He never made us the same thing twice, and as the weeks went by, I actually found myself growing hungrier throughout the days, wondering what Devin was going to make next or thinking about what I'd make for him.

I was slowly beginning to gain weight and Devin told me so one day. I made a joke about looking terrible, being so thin, and he told me to never put myself down, even if I was joking. After that, I had an easier time looking at myself in the mirror. If someone as beautiful as Devin could look at me and think I was all right, maybe I wasn't so bad after all.

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"What a surprise," Amanda said. She was wearing a pink and white striped T-shirt and her hair was hanging straight around her round face. Her room still looked like a disaster, but less so than usual. It was surprising to see corners of posters actually sticking to the wall instead of peeling off.

It was close to Amanda's and my usual meeting time, except a few minutes later. Each day in the past few weeks, Amanda seemed to be later and later to our webcam chats. When I asked her about it, she just brushed it off to *this* and *that*.

"Well, well, look at you," she said.

"What about me?" I asked, feeling self-conscious.

The previous week I'd deviated from my usual schedule and decided to look online for some new clothing. I found a local website that delivered within a few days and decided to take a look. A cerulean-colored short sleeve, button-up shirt caught my attention. It reminded me of the bouncy ball Devin had so proudly displayed to me weeks ago. On a whim, I'd purchased it along with a few other colored shirts that I'd normally avoid because of the repercussions of wearing them when I was sure all I'd do that day was coat the floor in bleach. But now that I had someone to talk to, someone who would actually see me, it didn't seem like such a terrible idea.

I tugged at the collar of my shirt, suddenly feeling like it was too tight. Normally I didn't fold under Amanda's scrutiny, but she was looking at me a little harder than normal and it was making me sweat.

"You look different. I don't think I've ever seen you with a colored shirt on," Amanda said.

"Yes, well," I replied nervously.

"You've also gained weight recently. You look good. What's going on with that?"

"Nothing. Really," I told her.

She just continued to stare at me, her pixelated gaze lingering on my face.

"Fine," I said. "I guess it's because of Devin."

"Your neighbor you told me about? The one who won't piss off and leave you alone?"

"Yes, one and the same. Well, we've started to talk a bit from across the hall. He's a nice enough person. Sometimes we talk about each other's lives and he tells me about the outside world. His job as a swim instructor, his family, his trips to the farmers' market, what he's making for dinner that night, his erratically hilarious late-night phone calls from his younger sisters."

"Uh huh," she replied with a sly look on her face. "And what's he look like?"

"I don't know. Tall, tanned, dark hair. He's attractive, I guess."

"You guess?"

"All right, he is. Can we not talk about this? Please?"

My face was red hot as I began fidgeting with the lower buttons on my shirt. I stared down at the hem, regretting buying the stupid shirt and regretting telling Amanda anything about Devin. They both had a way of getting under my skin, and I didn't like that one bit.

"So, I met someone," Amanda said. "And yes, before you ask, it's completely platonic. Her name is Chelsea. She's really cool, in a valley-girl sort of way. Sometimes she calls or stops by to hang out. She actually convinced me yesterday to let another one of her friends come over. Can you imagine that? Me, hanging out with other people. Still not outside, mind you, but letting a stranger into my life is a pretty big step."

Amanda started to laugh and my heart swelled up. I'd never seen her look so excited or so proud, and I was happy for her, genuinely happy. Her new friend Chelsea was likely the reason Amanda was late to our webcam chats

lately, and I'd never hold that against her. She had every right in the world to spend time with new people in her life.

I thought about the baby steps Amanda and I were taking. Me and her, each beginning to branch out and try new things, without using one another as a crutch. She and I didn't need each other, and that was a good reminder to have, but it sure was nice having her around.

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## Chapter 5

“You’re doing great!” Devin exclaimed, giving me two thumbs up. Who gave people thumbs up anymore?

How Devin had managed to coerce me into going outside with him, I’d never know. He promised that the pool in our complex would be deserted and even assured me that the chances of us running into anyone in the hallways were slim to none. He didn’t try to touch me or hold my hand like I was a child. He talked to me like I was his old friend, telling me about a particularly bratty kid he’d began teaching recently and then proceeding to ask me about my day. He would encourage me when I’d complete small feats, like leaving my apartment and locking the door behind me, and going through the stairwell. Devin always seemed to know the right things to say, and how best to make me feel good about myself. I couldn’t help but wonder if he had done a bit of research on people with severe OCD and social anxiety disorder.

Devin was right when he’d said that we wouldn’t run into anyone in the halls or outside, near the pool. The weather was tepid, humid, and surprisingly refreshing. When he’d opened the stairwell door and waited for me to follow him through, I’d been hit with a blast of awareness. Awareness of the bright sun, the heaviness of the air around me, and the shine of Devin’s huge smile.

The pool looked old and rather small, but Devin insisted any body of water was better than no body of water. It was uncovered and had a few stray green leaves basking on the surface, soaking up the sun like they belonged there. The concrete around the pool was old with a few cracks in it, but looked secure enough not to send me into a fit. There were metal and rubber lawn chairs surrounding the pool, the metal white and the rubber bands were a multitude of pastels, faded by sun damage in some spots.

I heard a bird chirping off in the distance, and the quiet humming of car engines even further than that. There was a high fence around the outside patio area, likely to ward off guests who weren’t residents of the complex. Another safety measure that made me feel comfortable.

“Isn’t it beautiful out here?” Devin asked.

He held his arms open wide and squinted at me from a couple of feet away. I wanted to tell him that squinting caused wrinkles and not wearing protective eyewear out in the sun, especially for someone like him who was constantly

outdoors, was probably a bad idea. But he looked so happy and so serene, completely in his element and loving the fact that he'd managed to drag his vampiric neighbor out into the sunlight.

"Yes, it's very nice," I said awkwardly, wrapping my arms around myself.

"Come on," Devin called, motioning for me to follow him. He led us off into the corner and took a seat on one of the slightly rusted pool chairs. His hand was used as a makeshift visor over his eyes as he looked up at me and stuck out his tongue. It was hard not to laugh.

I took a seat in the chair right beside his, which seemed to surprise him. We hadn't been this physically close since the first day he knocked on my door and invaded my life.

Devin stared at me for a few moments, his pink lips slightly parted. I allowed him at first, thinking he was probably having a moment, like when a spectator watches a monkey in a zoo, but after a bit I tilted my face toward his and looked up at him.

"What?" I asked quietly. I was trying to avoid making eye contact.

He was silent and intent for a moment before putting a lopsided grin on his face. "Nothing. I like your outfit."

I looked down at myself and decided if he noticed any color on my face, I'd blame it on the sun. Among my most current order of clothing, I'd purchased a pale yellow T-shirt with a picture of waves inside a circle on the center of the chest. Along with that was a pair of light blue *boating shorts*, whatever that meant. When I'd purchased the outfit, somewhere deep in the back caverns of my mind, I'd hoped Devin would say he liked it, but I'd never admit that to him.

I leaned back in the chair, folding my hands over my stomach, and closed my eyes. I assumed Devin did the same because he began talking about the pH levels in our pool and the one he worked at and how he felt compelled to check on them regularly to make sure they were all good. They always were, he told me, but one can apparently never be too careful when it came to pH levels.

I liked listening to Devin talk. There was something supremely comforting in the tone of his voice, like the world had never, in its existence, suffered a single problem. When I was around him, sometimes my body would be filled with this heinous idea that I wanted to touch him, sometimes in a friendly way, sometimes more romantically. I couldn't help myself, though. I assumed



everyone liked Devin; he was impossible not to be drawn to. He was easy to be around, easy to talk to, easy to listen to, and even easier to look at. I'd never really been much of a fan of people, but if I had to be a fan of someone, I figured it would be Devin.

"Hey, Devin!" someone hollered.

My eyes shot open. I sat up quickly, looking around frantically for the owner of the voice.

"Jude," Devin whispered, leaning into me slightly. "It's okay. Just my friends. Sometimes they show up unannounced and uninvited. But you wouldn't know anything about that, huh?"

I appreciated him trying to joke about the situation and make me feel comfortable, but I was anything but. My heart was racing in my chest, and I could feel my lower back begin to sweat and dampen the back of my new shirt.

Devin's group of friends opened the gate on the fence and then began walking over to us. There were three of them in total—two men and a girl, all of whom were as attractive as Devin. I made myself stare down at the concrete on the ground and avoid eye contact at all costs.

"Hey," someone said, seemingly from right in front of us. I started to breathe hard.

"Hi guys," Devin said. "This is Jude, my neighbor from across the hall."

They all sounded their greetings toward me, and I lifted my head just enough to stare at their exposed knees and wiggle my fingers in salutations.

"Oh, so *he's* the neighbor!" one of Devin's friends said.

"Shut up, Mark. Seriously," Devin said hurriedly.

I'd had enough. I didn't care at that moment if I was being rude, but I knew I had to leave before the situation blew up into a full-blown panic attack and I started convulsing on the old patio furniture.

"Thavetogobye," I said, speeding through the statement like it was one word.

I stood up and kept my head down, rushing to the back door of the apartment building and swooping inside.

Devin didn't call out to me or ask me to wait. I heard him say he'd talk to me tomorrow as I was practically running away from him and his friends. Another thing I liked about Devin was that he knew when to push me and when not to.

By the time I was safely back in my apartment behind four very secure locks, I was able to breathe. I sat down on the floor and leaned my back against the door, letting my head fall and gently knock against the wooden surface.

I felt like today was a success, and it had been. I'd enjoyed the beautiful weather outside, listened to Devin tell me stories, and even had an encounter with strangers that didn't result in a panic attack. All in all, it was a good day.

I closed my eyes and smiled a little, thinking of the progress I'd made over the past few weeks. None of it had felt as overwhelming or ominous as I had once expected it to. It was becoming easier, almost feeling natural to know I would be pushing myself and trying new things. Not every day, of course, but slowly, at my own pace.

I heard noises in the hallway and listened to the sounds of Devin and his friends entering his apartment. A small part of me wished that I was normal, that I had the courage to get up and walk over there and join them, but I knew that wasn't possible.

A small, folded note was slipped under the door, right next to my hand. I unfolded it and read the words written on the paper.

*Jude,*

*You look good lying in the sun.*

*Devin*

I folded the small piece of paper and slipped it into my pocket with a smile on my face. I would keep this little note as a memento, a small reminder of the huge steps I'd taken and the notice that I'd received on behalf of my efforts.

Today was a good day.

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## Chapter 6

I lifted the transparent brown bottle off the skateboard and looked at the tiny droplets of water running down the sides. The bottle felt cold and foreign in my hand, but that made sense since I'd never had alcohol before. I pressed the rim of the bottle to my lips and took a tiny sip. Devin was staring at me from across the hallway, and I couldn't help but feel the heaviness of his gaze.

I set the bottle back down on the skateboard and licked my lips.

"It's all right," I said.

"Yeah," he chuckled. "Most people don't like beer right off the bat. Maybe next time we can make margaritas or try a cider."

I just shrugged and rolled the skateboard over to him. "Whatever you think."

He winked at me, then grabbed the bottle and took a huge gulp.

Devin looked good. He usually looked good. He was wearing a worn pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and his usual wide smile. I had no idea what he was always smiling about. In fact, I thought it odd that someone could be so smiley all the time. Devin must've seen the world in a different light than I did. Where I saw vast expanses of nothing but whiteness and dull comparisons of reality, Devin saw things in the brightest forms of Technicolor, and constantly acted as if he'd basked in its glow during his sleep. I wanted some of his color to rub off on me. I wanted more of his smiles.

I heard a faint gasp from the far end of the hallway. My head whipped to the side, and I instinctively drew my formerly extended legs in close to me. Standing there on the shabby crimson carpet at the end of the hallway was my mother.

"Jude Allen," she screeched. "What in the world are you doing outside your apartment? Don't you know what this kind of stress does to you? Mentally? And who is this man? Did he make you leave your apartment? How many times am I going to have to remind you not to push yourself like this! It's unhealthy."

"Oh, um, hi Mom," I said quietly, looking down at the floor. "This is Devin, my neighbor."

Devin stood up fully and extended his hand out to my mother, but his lips were pressed together into a straight line and the crinkles he usually had in the corners of his eyes when he smiled, were missing.

“Nice to meet you ma’am. My name is Devin Kidd.”

She gave him a thorough look, examining him from head to toe. I wonder if she saw the same person I saw every day when I looked at Devin. I wondered if Devin would make her feel the same way he made me feel.

“You may call me Mrs. Allen,” she said curtly without extending her hand. Devin dropped his hand back down to his side.

My mother wasn’t necessarily stuck-up, but she had a certain aura about her that reeked of false superiority. She was a tall woman, much larger than me; I’d gotten my small frame from my father. She constantly wore knee-length coats in an assortment of rosy colors, and could easily be heard down the street because of the clacking noise her kitten heels made on the pavement. Her hair was much like mine, a light brown and usually kept up in a bun. Her face, however, wasn’t at all youthful in appearance. Her cheeks were much too hollow, her nose too long, her chin much too severe.

Sometimes I wondered if people could even tell we were related because of how different we looked. Sometimes I wished my father were still around so I could have a glimpse of the type of man I’d grow to resemble.

“Well, Jude,” my mother said, turning toward me. “Explain why you’re out here. Have you been having panic attacks lately? You know what happens when you leave your apartment. You suffer from panic attacks and it takes days to recover.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right,” I said softly. I stood up and brushed off my pants while continuing to stare at the ground.

“Excuse me, Mrs. Allen,” Devin said. “But Jude was doing just fine.”

She swiveled around on her heels and stared straight at him. “And what would you know about what’s right and wrong for my son?”

“Well, I know that people with severe OCD should be encouraged constantly to challenge the limitations they’ve set for themselves, and it’s important to acknowledge when they’ve made improvements, like Jude has.”

I had no idea how Devin knew about that. I didn’t even know that. My mother had told me years ago that looking too deeply into my OCD or my social anxiety disorder would likely be worse for my condition. She told me that it would probably frighten me, so I’d never had the courage to question her or do any research of my own.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” she snapped at Devin. “And I think it would be best if you stayed away from my son.”

My mother turned away from Devin then ushered me in through my apartment doorway. I looked back over my shoulder at Devin, and he looked like he was trying his best to smile at me.

My mother closed the door behind us and made sure all four of my locks were securely in place. Watching her fasten the bolts made me realize that I’d forgotten to close the bottom lock earlier that day. I wondered what that meant.

Later that evening, after my mother had finally left, I was completely exhausted. My mother had stopped by to check on me and spent the remainder of her visit ranting and complaining about my heathen neighbor, telling me that the corners in my kitchen looked dirty, and lecturing me about the wrinkles I’d left in the comforter on my bed.

And she was right. I had been getting sloppy, and I had begun slacking on my cleaning and folding and pressing and perfecting of things. Somehow, I hadn’t noticed before she’d pointed it out. I’d been too busy recreationally looking on the Internet at foreign cities I wished I had pictures of, and thinking about what Devin would make us for dinner that evening.

Still, I couldn’t help but feel a little guilty about the way she’d treated Devin. I decided I’d apologize to him. I felt brave, somehow, even after everything my mother had said. I knew that Devin would be proud of me if I marched over to his apartment and knocked on his door, but more importantly, I knew that I would be proud of myself.

I walked to my front door, unlocked the locks, opened the door, and then peeked out into the hallway to see if anyone was there. The coast was clear so I tiptoed over to Devin’s door and reached out to knock.

Admittedly, it took me a few tries. I stood there with my clenched fist extended, likely looking like an idiot, trying to gather the courage to knock on his door. Eventually I pulled myself together and softly knocked on the door with my knuckles, trying my best not to run away and hide like a child.

Devin opened the door and stood there, looking at me with a smile on his face.

“Hey,” I said quietly.

“Hey, you,” Devin replied.

"I'm sorry about my mother. I know she can be kind of rude and come off the wrong way."

"It's all right, I'm not concerned about what she said to me. But Jude, you have to know that you have been making progress and you should be proud of yourself, despite what your mother might think. She might not always know what's best for you; only you know what's best for you."

"Yeah," I said, slightly nodding. "You're right."

"And I've seen you come out of your shell so much these past few weeks. I've seen you progressively smile more. I've watched you laugh and try new things, some you liked and some you didn't, but you tried them anyway, and you should feel damn proud that you did."

I looked up into his eyes and couldn't help but grin at him. "Yeah. I have tried new things, and it is making me happier. I can sleep better at night, and I don't panic nearly as much during the day. We're even on chapter sixteen of *To Kill a Mockingbird!*"

Devin laughed and scratched the back of his neck nervously.

"I can't remember the last time I felt so... free," I said. "Definitely before my dad left. He left when I was fifteen, and my mom took it pretty hard; she cried for months afterward. My dad liked things really clean. I remember him lecturing me and Mom about the cleanliness of the house, always saying it was never good enough."

"Parents aren't always right, okay?"

"I know."

"Here," Devin said, holding out his hand, palm facing me. "You're so much stronger than you know, Jude."

I stared at his open palm. He wanted me to touch him. I knew if I didn't, he wouldn't be offended or angry or even judge me. I knew that if I asked him to stop trying to push me, he'd find other subtle ways to do it. But I also knew that I could touch Devin, if I wanted to. And I did want to.

Tentatively, I reached out and slowly, carefully, pressed the palm of my much smaller hand against his. My heart beat fast as I felt the warm flesh of his hand touching mine, whether it was out of fear or desire, I had no idea. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so alive.

"Me Tarzan, you Jane," Devin said with a wide grin on his face.

I threw my head back and laughed. I kept my open palm connected with Devin's, relishing the feeling of real human contact, but I couldn't help the fit of laughter I was experiencing. I was completely and totally elated, flying high and fast and far, never looking down and never wondering what terrors might wait for me around the next corner.

When I finally calmed down, I looked at Devin. He was just staring at me. Staring at me with the most serious look I'd ever seen on his face.

Suddenly, Devin's fingers shifted and he closed his hand around mine. His other hand came up behind my neck and pulled me toward him.

And then he kissed me.

Devin kissed me, and the whole world, time, the entire fucking universe, stopped.

He pressed his soft lips tight against mine and kissed me. Devin wasn't tentative, he was free and rushed and passionate. His lips were closed, but they remained pressed against mine. Then I felt the wet tip of his tongue breach the gap from his mouth to my lips, slowly beginning to press at the seal of my mouth. Acting on their own, my lips slightly parted and Devin's tongue gently pressed its way in and slowly ran against mine, causing me to make a quiet moaning noise, one I had no idea I was capable of making.

I allowed myself that single moment to feel alive and wanted and desired. I allowed myself to want Devin all the ways I knew I wanted him, and all the ways I hoped he wanted me back. I allowed the universe to stand still, just for that moment, because I knew it couldn't last. And when that moment was over, I knew I had a price to pay for falling in love with a man from just one kiss.

I broke free from Devin and shoved him away. My lungs couldn't get enough oxygen and I began hyperventilating. My legs carried me back into the doorway of my apartment where I collapsed onto my knees and hunched over, pulling my head into my thighs while I tried to gulp the air around me.

I could hear Devin spouting his apologies like he was a fountain and they flowed like water, but I couldn't acknowledge him. He sounded far enough away for me to assume he'd stayed in his apartment and was watching me crumble in on myself from across the hallway.

I was breathing hard, continuing to try to press my forehead against my thighs while I counted in my head. Sometimes counting helped to slow down and regulate my breathing, but this seemed to be one of those times where it did

nothing at all. I felt the walls around me begin to close in, locking me inside and leaving me in the dark. Everything felt hazy. I couldn't focus on anything other than trying to breathe deep and slow myself down.

It felt like hours passed when my breathing finally slowed and my body stopped trying to coil itself into a tiny, compact ball. I tilted my head and looked over at Devin's doorway. He was sitting there, staring at me intently, looking frantic and afraid.

"Jude, I'm so sorry," he said. "You were looking at me and I just—I couldn't—fuck! I'm sorry."

I was completely mortified. Devin had kissed me. He kissed me and I practically had to throw myself through my door to get away from him. It wasn't Devin. It was me. I wanted to tell him such, but I couldn't find the words, I couldn't find any words. So I just kept looking at him, watching him nervously rub his hands over his face.

Devin was too good for someone like me, someone so damaged, so broken. He deserved to be with someone else who could shine at least half as bright as he did, someone full of life and love to give him.

I stood up and closed my apartment door, even as Devin kept talking, too mortified and consumed with self-loathing to listen to another word. I secured all four locks on the door, then slinked down against the wall and listened to the silence that surrounded me.

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## Chapter 7

“What a surprise,” Amanda said.

I couldn't even crack a smile.

“Wow, you look like you didn't sleep at all last night,” Amanda said. She was wearing a light blue T-shirt with a picture on the front of a unicorn jumping over a rainbow.

“I didn't. I was up all night cleaning everything twice over,” I replied. I could see myself in the small window on my computer monitor. Amanda was right, I looked terrible.

“It's been a while since you've had to do that,” she said.

“Something happened yesterday.”

“What happened yesterday?”

“My mom came over. She caught me and Devin sitting in the hallway sharing a beer and she kind of lost it on Devin. I went over to apologize for the way my mother treated him, and then Devin kissed me.”

“He kissed you!” Amanda yelled.

It wasn't my first kiss, or even my first experience with another person, another boy, but it affected me so much more deeply than the previous times.

I'd had my first kiss when I was twelve. I kissed my old best friend, Johnny, and for a little bit he let me. Afterwards, he told me he'd rather kiss Carrie than me. After that, I was a little bit choosier about my kissing partners.

When I was fifteen, I would fool around with one of my neighbors, a cute, light-haired boy named Parker who always tasted like grape Kool-Aid. Parker actually kissed me first and after that, we'd always be looking for reasons to spend time together. He was the first boy I'd ever been with intimately. When he'd unzipped my pants and glided his soft hand down into my underwear, I came within moments.

But my kiss with Devin was something completely different. It had stolen my breath away, causing me to fall quick and hard into the pit of pure *wanting* that was Devin.

I wanted to tell Amanda about all the ways that Devin made me feel, but that was just another thing my fear kept me from doing.

“And then?” she asked.

“And then I shoved him away, ran into my apartment, and had a panic attack. And then, when I could finally breathe again, I slammed the door in his face. I’ve never been so embarrassed in my life.”

“You’re embarrassed? Think of how he must feel, Jude. He’s probably mortified.”

I leaned back in my computer chair and glanced over at the wall. It was white, so very, completely white. Everything around me was. I didn’t live in this stark white apartment, I lived inside my mind, a mind that I’d covered in coat after coat of absolute whiteness. And the only person who had ever really helped me peek through the infinite sea of white, I’d run away from.

“You’re right,” I said to Amanda. “I’m being selfish again. I should go talk to him, shouldn’t I?”

“Yes! Absolutely. But I don’t envy you.”

“I know. I’m mortified.”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go!” Amanda said. She waved at me for a split second, then signed off, leaving me staring at my desktop.

I sighed heavily and closed my eyes. I knew I had to go apologize to Devin for the second time within twenty-four hours.

Pulling myself up and out of my chair, I left my office and made my way down the hall. I stopped in the bathroom to fix my hair and try to keep it swept off to one side, but it refused to cooperate. I gave up eventually, deciding to just brush my teeth.

I unlocked and opened my front door, peeked into the hallway to make sure the coast was clear, then slowly trudged over to Devin’s apartment door. It felt easier to knock on his door this time, even though I was more mortified than I had been previously. But I’d done this before, and I knew I could do it again. So I reached out and gently rapped on the door.

I waited anxiously, wringing my fingers and staring down at the ground. The door swung open and I looked up, completely taken off guard by the strange man standing in front of me.

He was tall, dark, and devastatingly handsome. Those qualities paired with the fact that he was dripping wet and wrapped only in a small, blue towel, dried my throat in an instant. I just stared up at him, completely horrified that this man was answering Devin’s door.

If it were physically possible, I felt my heart break just then. It broke with the realization that I knew this was the type of man Devin deserved, someone handsome and confident and normal. Still, the selfish person I was mourned the loss of a love I'd never really known.

“Hey,” the stranger said with a smile on his face. “Can I help you?”

I turned around instantly and ran back into my apartment, slamming the door shut. My hands were shaking, and my fingers weren't moving as quickly as I needed them to when I fumbled through each of my four locks. I heard voices from the hall, Devin and the strange man, then Devin's voice closer, and the sound of him knocking on my door.

“Jude?” Devin said frantically. “Jude, open up.”

I shook my head without him being able to see me. I stumbled backward, staring at the door like I was the victim in a horror movie and the monster was about to break through the wooden door at any second.

I left the hallway, trying to ignore the sounds of Devin calling to me and banging on my door. I sat on my bed and stared at nothing but the blankness of the white wall in my bedroom.

I had no one but myself to blame. I shouldn't have allowed myself to get that close to Devin, to attach myself to him and let him sneak under my skin the way he did. I repeatedly reminded myself that my world was not ending just because Devin was sleeping with another man, but it still felt like it was.

My anxiety was prevalent as the hours rolled by. I continued to sit on my bed, staring, long after the rapping on my front door had stopped. My back was sore from leaning forward so long and my throat felt raw. My body was telling me it was time to rest, but my mind was telling me that it was time to clean. I didn't have the energy to try and fight with myself, not right then.

I made my way into the kitchen and extracted my old friends, the bottle of bleach, a few rags, and rubber gloves. I sat down right there on the floor and snapped the gloves onto my hands without realizing I was doing it. I unscrewed the lid from the bottle and just began to pour. The bleach beat down on the tile floor, spreading itself out like it had been waiting to get free. It continued to pool and stretch, dampening the fabric of my pants and socks, but I barely noticed. I took the rag in my hand and began to scrub, trying my best to clean all the dirt in between the cracks in the floor. There was so much, I had no idea how I'd ever let it become so soiled. The dirt in the cracks, the specks on the tile, the stains on the cupboard doors. Even me. I looked at my arm and stared

at the pale freckles that landscaped my skin. The dirt was on me. It was everywhere, and I hadn't even noticed. Everything looked so disgusting, so filthy, of course Devin wouldn't want me.

I wanted to pour the bleach onto my skin, to purify myself, to get off all the uncleanness that was on me. I wanted to scrub and scrub until my skin was red and raw. Until I felt clean.

I breathed in deep, smelling the familiar, comforting scent of the bleach. I had been living in a fool's paradise; I knew there was no amount of bleach on the planet that would make me clean enough for Devin.

\*\*\*\*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

*Bang.*

It had been exactly nineteen days since I'd last seen Devin, and each one of those days, Devin had raised his white flag in the form of a bouncy ball hitting my door.

I never answered the door.

After the first couple of times Devin had bounced the ball and knocked on my door, I considered opening it and hearing him out, whatever he had to say. He didn't owe me anything, I knew that, but my own fear kept me from Devin.

I felt empty and alone most nights as I lay in bed, trying to ignore the way my mind wandered across the hall. Nothing seemed as bright lately; nothing seemed as wonderful or magical as it had before. My world was slowly starting to fade, to morph into that blank canvas it had once been long before I met Devin. I had no paints and no pigment, so that canvas of my life remained white, blank, unused, and I felt every moment of my lack of color.

Each day in the evening, Devin would write me a small note about what he did that day, and despite trying to tell myself that I didn't care, they were always the highlight of my day. He'd write about his teaching lessons that day or a new recipe he'd looked up online, and he would finish the note off by writing something personalized to me at the bottom of the paper. He'd tell me to read another chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird* on my own, even if I couldn't finish it, or to try to rearrange my furniture, even if it was just moving the side table a few inches. And without ever planning on telling Devin that each day I'd follow his suggestions, I did, and each night, I'd sleep a little bit better.

The truth was, I missed Devin. I missed him in ways I didn't remember missing anyone for a very long time. I missed his companionship, his smile, his sometimes-inedible food. I missed the way he looked at me, and I missed the way I felt when I looked back at him. When I thought of Devin, I felt an ache in the pit of my stomach and a pull in my chest, reminding me that when Devin had kissed me, he'd taken a part of me for himself.

Everything in my life continued as planned, according to the schedule I'd previously set up for myself and worked on for so many years. Things were a little different with me trying to push myself and try different things, but not to the same degree that I had when Devin was around.

On day twenty-six, I began to worry about Amanda. I hadn't seen or heard from her in nine days and it wasn't like her to up and leave without a note or to miss our webcam meetings. They had become later and later as the weeks had passed, and some days she'd tell me that she had to skip our next meeting, but it was very unusual behavior to have her leave without a word.

I was sitting in my computer chair in my office, staring at the desktop wallpaper, a beautiful, clear picture of the ocean, when Amanda emailed me. At first, I was surprised. She almost never emailed me, and when she did, it was usually article links I'd never click on. But this time, it was a message she'd written to me.

*Jude,*

*I'm sorry I haven't been around much lately and I hope you haven't been worried. My new psychologist is pretty cool and he tells me to try to break some of my old patterns. I've been hanging out with my friend Chelsea much more lately, and we've become really close. This is the nearest I've been to happiness in a long time.*

*Jude, whatever happened between you and Devin, you need to give him another chance. You need to give yourself another chance.*

*And for fuck's sake, find out what happens to Scout.*

*Amanda*

I sat back and stared at the words on the screen. All this time I'd been sitting at home, moping, feeling sorry for myself, Amanda had been out trying to make her life better. And she'd succeeded.

What had I done? I'd continued to sit around and wait for my life to happen to me. When Devin was around, he'd taught me that it was all right to try new things, and those new things that I had tried hadn't been as difficult as my mind made them out to be. I did them all on my own, sure, with encouragement from Devin, but that was me. I'd taken those steps, I'd challenged my routine, I'd done new, amazing things. I did it all.

The first time I met Devin, he'd told me that I wasn't my OCD, and at the time, I had no idea what he meant by that. But since meeting Devin, I'd learned so much more about myself. I learned that I enjoyed cooking, and eating, I didn't like beer, I enjoyed listening to pop music and jazz, my favorite color is yellow, and that I would be okay.

I would be okay.

I knew I wouldn't get better overnight, and I knew that if I ever wanted my life to change, it would be a lot of work. But in the end, wasn't it worth it? Wouldn't it be worth it to see Devin again, maybe even to touch him? Be with him? My disorders weren't something to be overlooked or ignored, but I was exhausted from making them what defined me.

For the first time in many years, I wanted to have complete and total control over myself, over my disorders. I wanted to be able to make a decision for myself, and not have my own fear stand in my way.

I stood up, walked into the kitchen, and took the notes that Devin had written me off the top of the fridge. Sitting on my uncomfortable sofa, which was now facing the large picture that hung on my wall, I unfolded and reread each of the notes. They were sweet, simple, and all written in Devin's chicken scratch writing.

After reading each note, I would set it down on my lap and repeat the small words of encouragement that Devin had written to me. He wrote that I was special and that I was smart and that I'd come so far and should be proud. I knew Devin would never say those things to me just to make me feel better, so each time I repeated those words to myself, saying them out loud, they rang more and more true.

Remembering that there would be a note left from the night prior, I stood up and walked over to my front door. There on the ground was my small, folded reminder of Devin. I bent over, grabbed the note, and unfolded it.

There on the white piece of paper was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen contrasted against something so white and plain. He'd written a few small

words that I never in my entire life thought I'd read, never thought I'd think, never thought I'd be.

*You are strong.*

I fell asleep that night with a smile on my face, thinking of the different colored swirls in the bouncy ball across the hallway.

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Amanda and I started webcam chatting at irregular times, and often only a few times a week, which seemed to work for both of us. Amanda had told me all about her new doctor and the recent additions to her growing group of friends. She was becoming more outgoing and vibrant, and I couldn't be anything but happy for my friend. We were beginning to help one another progress by encouraging each other to leave our comfort zones and to stop relying on our friendship to act as an excuse not to.

When Amanda first suggested I give her psychiatrist a call, I was nervous. I'd told her that I didn't want to chat with a stranger over the telephone and that it likely wouldn't do me any good. But I took a few deep breaths and tried to slow down my breathing, internally asking myself what I really had to lose. If talking to someone who understood her condition had helped Amanda so much, then I thought it would be worth it to give it a try.

The next day I called her psychiatrist, Dr. Wade Hamelton, but he allowed me to refer to him as Wade. We talked on the phone twice before switching to webcam chats, and I liked Wade even more. He was a middle-aged man with a kind smile and thin, wire-framed glasses. He smiled a lot and didn't insist on anything.

Wade usually just listened to me talk and had an easy way of explaining the things in my life that acted like triggers. He helped encourage me to break my patterns and let down my walls. He was very motivating about branching out, trying things that were uncomfortable, but he never made me feel like it was a simple task. Some days he'd tell me how well I was doing, and when I was stressed he'd tell me that he understood why—because of the changes in my patterns. Wade would tell me I had every reason to be upset, but even more reason to try harder next time. Every time he told me he understood, I felt like a weight was lifted off my chest.

After only a few sessions with Wade, I'd made a decision that I would tell my mother.

“Hi Mom,” I said quietly into the receiver.

“Jude? What’s wrong? Why are you calling?” she replied.

“Nothing, I just wanted to tell you something.”

“Are you all right? Now you have me worried, Jude. Don’t do anything rash.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. “No, Mom, nothing like that. I just wanted to tell you that I’m getting some help, help with my OCD and my social anxiety.”

Silence.

“I called a psychiatrist, his name is Wade, and he’s a nice man. He listens and gives me good advice, and makes me feel like I’m capable of doing more than I have been these past few years,” I told her.

“Jude,” she replied. “I don’t think this is a good idea. I know how these types of things cause you stress.”

“Yes, I know, but I have to face myself one day, so it might as well be today. I’m tired of being alone. I’m tired of not being myself.”

“It’s that man who lives across the hallway from you, isn’t it? I knew he was trouble from the moment I first laid eyes on him, and now he’s gone and put all of these ideas in your head.”

“No, Mom, this wasn’t his idea, it was mine. I want to get help. I want to get better. I want more than I’ve allowed myself to have since Dad left. Wade suggested that thoughts of Dad were triggers for me because I never allowed myself to mourn his leaving. But he’s gone; he left us and he isn’t coming back. I’ve allowed myself some time to grieve and to be angry and upset and hurt, and I really feel like you’d benefit from doing the same.

“In the past few weeks I’ve only cleaned my apartment a handful of times, I finished *To Kill a Mockingbird* and there was one part I found so adorable, when Scout dressed up as a ham, that the milk I was drinking came out of my nose. I didn’t even know I liked milk. I went outside the other day, just to see if the park across the street from me has changed in the past few years. I left my bed unmade for two days straight and when I fell asleep at night, I barely even thought about it. I went to the home improvement store and purchased buckets of paint in so many shades of blue; I’m planning on painting every wall in this apartment within the next few months.



“Mom, what I’m saying is, I’m getting better. Not all at once, and some days I feel like I haven’t made any progress at all, but I am getting better. I am not my disorders. I am Jude, and I’m finally ready to be happy.”

My mom started to cry on the other end of the phone. She was sobbing like her heart was breaking, and I knew that feeling. I had cried like that the same night Wade told me I had to grieve the loss of my father and acknowledge that I couldn’t keep waiting for him to come back to me. I’d cried and cried and when I had no more tears left, I laughed. It was therapeutic, feeling like all those tears that were pooled inside me for my father were gone. I had nothing left to give him, not my time, not my thoughts, not my happiness. I hoped my mom would feel the same.

“Jude, I’m so sorry,” she cried. “I never meant to put you in a bubble, it’s just that I saw how unhappy you were and it was bleeding me dry. I couldn’t make him come back, so if I kept you safe, away from harm, you wouldn’t leave me either.”

My mother was only human, after all. We all had our flaws and we’d all made our mistakes. At least that’s what Wade had told me, and he’d know better than I would about the human condition. I didn’t blame her for my disorders, and I wasn’t upset with her in any way. I was an adult, and should’ve decided a long time ago that I wanted more for myself in this life than living in a perfect, little, white box.

When I got off the telephone with my mother, I felt lighter than I ever had. Something weighted had lifted off me and I was finally free.

I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror that was now in the corner of my bedroom. The flowers I’d gathered from a walk yesterday were sitting on my side table, smelling like fresh lilac and summer. Every time I passed by them, I smiled, reminded of my own courage and the things I was capable of.

When I looked in the mirror, I felt more comfortable with myself than I had in a long time. I’d finally gained some weight from beginning to eat better and more frequently, my clothes fit me better and were all gorgeous colors and patterns. My bright blue eyes finally looked like they matched the glossy cerulean color that swirled through Devin’s bouncy ball.

I smiled when I looked at myself, and even my smile was better now than it had been before. I wondered what Devin would think when he looked at me. I wondered if he’d see someone stronger, more confident—someone happier.

I ran my fingers through my freshly cut hair, sweeping it off my forehead. I was nervous, but I knew there was only one way I'd really know how Devin felt about me. I told myself that if Devin was involved with that other man, it would be all right. There would never be another Devin in my life, but I'd be okay. I'd learn to find my own piece of happiness.

It was later in the evening, later than any time I'd ever been with Devin before. My palms were sweaty as I exited my apartment and walked across the impossibly wide hallway to Devin's door. I barely hesitated when I knocked on his door because I knew that no matter the outcome, I was grateful to have had Devin in my life.

Devin swung the door open and looked at me with a strange look set on his face, a mixture between happiness and sadness. He smiled at me sweetly, almost shy, and opened the door wide enough to let me walk in.

As I'd noticed before, Devin's apartment looked almost identical to mine in layout, but very different in furnishings. This time, instead of clothing everywhere and empty containers and dishes, everything looked clean. The counters had all been wiped down and the floor look perfectly swept, even in the small corners and creases of the room. The television in the corner was on a low volume with some sort of football game on the screen. On the coffee table, in front of the sofa, was a stack of books and printed pieces of paper that all seemed to be on OCD. The pieces of paper were too difficult to make out from where I was standing, but there looked to be pen and highlighter marks all over the pages and in the margins.

"Your apartment looks nice," I said shyly.

"I tried to keep it clean in case you ever came over. I was just hopeful that you'd give me a chance," he replied.

"Before I could give you a chance, I had to give myself one first."

"It's not you, you know," Devin said quietly. "You aren't your OCD, but it is part of who you are, and I wanted to know more about you. It's so hard for me, Jude, so hard to get you to open up to me."

"I know," I said just as quietly. "But I'm trying."

Devin smiled at me, his usual, big smile, and I felt something squeeze in my chest.

I stared down at the floor, a hard habit to break. "A few months ago, that man—"

“No,” Devin said quickly. “He’s no one.”

“No one?” I asked.

Devin sighed. “He might’ve been, but he wasn’t. I couldn’t. Jude, it was so hard seeing you day after day, that fucking smile of yours, those eyes, that snarky sense of humor. I wanted you so badly, and not being able to even touch you felt like trying to breathe under a mountain of snow.

“I did make a mistake; I should’ve told you how I felt instead of throwing myself at you like that. And after you locked yourself in your apartment, I went looking for love in all the wrong places. Nothing happened, between him and I, and it wasn’t because you came over. I just... I couldn’t touch him. Not the way I want to touch you.”

There wasn’t a moment of hesitation when I reached out and put my hands on Devin’s arms. He remained perfectly frozen in place, like a warm, real representation of a marble statue, almost too beautiful to touch. But I did. I touched him, and I slowly ran my fingers down his exposed arms. I stopped and held his hands in mine. I looked up at him and pulled his arms back so they were wrapped around my waist. I reached up and looped one of my hands behind his neck, went up on my toes, and gently pressed my lips against his.

Devin was very still, barely opening his mouth to mine. I tried to encourage him by pressing the tip of my tongue into the open slit between his lips. I curled my tongue, licking the inside of his teeth, and I heard him moan. I grazed my fingertips up the back of his neck and then ran them through his soft, dark hair. Finally, his arms around me tightened and he pulled me closer and kissed me like he meant it.

It was everything I’d ever hoped for. The sparks, the lust, the heat, all of it.

I pulled back slightly and pressed my forehead against his.

“You know how I feel about you, right?” Devin asked me. I nodded.

“I felt the same way after that kiss. I knew then what this was between us.”

He smiled at me. “No, Jude. I knew since the first time you opened that door between us.”

Devin moved his head down, kissing my cheek, then my neck, then the muscle between my neck and shoulder. His fingers worked easily, slowly undoing the buttons of my shirt, then caressing his fingers up the bare skin of my chest.

This was new, and it was frightening and exhilarating at the same time. My heart was thudding against my rib cage and all the blood in my system was beginning to pool in the arousal pressing against the inside of my pants.

He slid my shirt off my shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Next, he lifted the bottom of his shirt up and over his head, tossing it near mine. Surprising him, I dropped to my knees and began undoing the buttons on the fly of his jeans. He continued to look down at me, and when I glanced up, he had a slack jaw look on his face that made me feel powerful.

I pulled down his jeans and underwear to his ankles, and then had him step out of them. When I leaned back and looked up at him, Devin stood stark naked, fully erect, and without a hint of shyness of his face. I was bombarded with a wave of lust, which left me staring at his entire bare body.

Devin reached down with one of his hands and stroked my cheek, pulling my chin up to look him in the eyes. He smiled at me, that gorgeous, intoxicating smile of his, and I was reminded all at once how badly I wanted to be with him, not only emotionally, but physically.

I leaned forward and cautiously licked the rosy head of his dick with my tongue. He let a quiet, choking noise slip past his lips right before I pet him with my tongue again. That time he moved his hand to the back of my head and wrapped his fingers in my hair.

I slowly leaned forward and swallowed him whole, trying to remember how exactly to make this good for someone else. It had been years since I'd done anything like this, but Devin's gentle pets encouraged me to carry on. I wrapped my tongue, as best I could, around his thickness, and moved my head slowly back and forth.

"Oh God, Jude," he whispered.

I looked up at him, still with him in my mouth. His eyebrows knitted together as he stared right back and grunted, pulling my hair.

I placed my hands on the sides of his hips, trying to hold him still as I continued to suck and lick and hum, each time attempting to shove him deeper and deeper into my throat.

"Hey, hey, hey," Devin said hastily. He pulled away from me and took a few deep breaths, then looked at me and smiled. "Sorry. It's been a while, and I don't want it to end just yet."

He took my hand and helped me to my feet. Before I knew what was happening, he grabbed me and tossed me over his shoulder. I started to laugh and wiggle my feet, but he had a strong grip around my waist and held me on his shoulder.

He walked us down the back hallway near his kitchen and continued in through his bedroom door. I was flopped down on the large bed, and he swiftly crawled on top of me and undid my pants. I leaned up on my elbows and watched him, scared and excited at the same time. I trusted Devin, knew he'd be kind and gentle with me my first time.

Devin pulled off my pants, underwear, and socks, then tossed them aside without a second thought. He stared down at me, naked and spread open for him. I hoped I wasn't still too skinny, too pale, too hollow. I hoped that when he looked at me, he felt the same longing I felt for him.

He reached down and ran his fingertips from the hollow of my collarbone, down to one of my nipples. He toyed with it, then moved down further to the adjacent hip.

"You're beautiful, Jude," Devin said to me, and for once, I believed him. I felt beautiful.

I rolled over onto my stomach and spread my legs a little wider, looking back at him over my shoulder. He looked perfect, kneeling on the mattress behind me, the overhead ceiling light illuminating his hard, toned figure and curving itself beautifully around his muscular shoulders and arms.

"Please," I whispered. I wanted him to take care of me, just this one time.

Devin nodded then crawled over to the side table, opened one of the drawers, then took out a small bottle and a little foil packet. He positioned himself between my legs, and I heard the snapping sound of the lid on the bottle.

We watched each other in silence as he reached down and his cool, slick fingers began to pet the small opening between my cheeks. I inhaled sharply, surprised by the feeling, and nervous about the act. He used his dry hand to lean to the side and moved up to kiss the skin between my shoulder blades as he continued to gently pet me without pressing his finger inside.

I laid my cheek against the soft, pale cotton of the sheets and closed my eyes. I breathed deeply and willed myself to relax and take in the magnitude of what was about to happen.

I wasn't afraid; this was what I wanted, what I felt like I'd waited most of my adult life to feel. This wasn't just sex. We both knew it; I could feel it and I knew Devin could too. This was a statement, a bond, a promise.

When Devin's first finger breached my small opening and slid its way in up to his knuckle, I said his name softly. He kissed my hair and spoke soft, sweet words to me, telling me how amazing I was and how lucky he was to have me in his life.

Devin slowly pulled his finger out and pushed it back in a few times before a second wet finger stretched in next to the first. That time my breath caught when he curled his fingers inside me and gently bit the back of my neck.

By the time Devin was using three fingers, I was painfully hard, feeling the weight of my dick pressed up against the softness of the sheets beneath me.

I wanted more. I needed more.

When he pulled his fingers out, I turned my head and looked back at him over my shoulder. He was watching me as he slid the condom on. He crawled on top of me, pressing against me as close as he could, kissing the back of my shoulders, my neck, my hair, as the head of his cock gently started to press against me.

It was tight, and when he first breached the clenched hole he'd so carefully prepared, I let out a small cry. It hurt a little, feeling full and invasive. Inch by inch, as he disappeared further and further inside my body, I began panting.

"Shhhh," Devin said, licking the back of my ear. "I'll be gentle. It'll be good."

When Devin was all the way inside me, I pressed my forehead against the mattress. I was breathing hard, my face felt like it was burning, and my body was damp with sweat. Devin stayed still for a few moments to let me adjust before he carefully rocked his hips, pulling out slowly and then gently pressing back in again. He groaned each time, soon breathing as heavily as I was.

Devin remained slow and gentle, often shifting his angle carefully to press the tip against the mound of nerves inside me that caused my back to bow and my mouth to dry instantly.

"I'm close, Jude," Devin whispered. He reached under me and wrapped his fingers around my swollen cock and began pumping his hand to the same rhythm he was pushing into me.

I cried out first and came, shoving my face into the sheets and fisting them so tightly I felt my dull nails dig into the palms of my hands. I began to soar and for once, my mind wasn't lost in some blank, desolate place. I was right there, with Devin and all of his beautiful colors, feeling every inch of him in my body, feeling the goose bumps on my arms and the sweat on my back. I'd never been so aware of myself, so aware of my body, and what having someone else touching me in such a tender way felt like.

Devin followed soon after me with a long, drawn out moan. I could feel him throbbing inside me when his big hands carefully pressed against my shoulders, pushing me into the mattress.

When it was over, Devin rolled off me, and I heard him walk over to the washroom. He was back within a minute and brought a cloth that he used to wipe my skin, being so careful it reminded me of how you'd polish a jewel. He tossed the cloth into a bin then lay back down on his side, facing me. When I looked over at him, he had a beautiful smile on his face, the biggest one yet, and that sight alone began to melt anything cold in my chest.

That was my smile, I decided right then, the one that Devin always wore for me. That was the smile that had made me realize that all the most difficult things in life would be worth doing ten times over, just for him.

"Hey," Devin said quietly.

He reached out and stroked his fingers through my hair, carefully moving the few strands off my face.

I smiled back at him. "Hi."

I felt loved. I felt whole, wanted, and loved. Nothing could ruin the experience I'd just shared with Devin, and nothing could take away the progress I'd made.

We continued to lie there for what felt like hours, looking at one another, smiling, laughing, talking, but mostly just enjoying the closeness of being together. The large window in his bedroom had the curtains drawn, and we stayed there from the time the sun was still gently touching the sky, until it was gone and the night came upon us in gorgeous shades of blue.

"I want to go to Hong Kong," I told Devin. "No, that's not right. I will go to Hong Kong, one day. And I'll go to Turkey, and travel through the spice markets. And I'll go to Greece to see the Delphi Theatre. And Croatia for the

beautiful trees and landscapes and the gorgeous blue shoreline. And then Italy for the museums, the Pantheon, Cinque Terre, overlooking the ocean...”

I fell asleep like that, telling Devin about all the amazing, wondrous things I was going to do in my life, all the gorgeous places I'd go. And each time I told him of some beautiful piece of the world that I was going to claim for my own, I knew he'd be right there with me.

**The End**



## **Author Bio**

*Nash Summers is a fanatical, fantastical, completely impractical writer of M/M Romance.*

*She is a lover of wise talkers and things that go bump in the night.*

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