

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

CUP OF TEA AND A FEW BROKEN RULES

C.C. Jaz

Table of Contents

Love's Landscapes.....3
Cup of Tea and a Few Broken Rules – Infomration5
Cup of Tea and a Few Broken Rules6
Author Bio 113

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

CUP OF TEA AND A FEW BROKEN RULES

By C.C. Jaz

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.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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C.C. Jaz

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[Arizona sunrise](#), [Yellow sunset with boats](#)

[Poollicht](#), [Perfect white beach](#)

[Sunset in Prague](#), [Purple mountain sunset](#)

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CUP OF TEA AND A FEW BROKEN RULES

By C.C. Jaz

Photo Description

Two men lie side by side, embracing one another. One of them has black ropes still tied around his wrists and ankles while the other holds him protectively.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Please help telling our story! How did we meet, what happened that brought us to this place:

What is it that always brings out my dominant side? Just looking at you and I'm there. All this beautiful skin, coupled with my dark restrains—it gets me going and wanting to have you at my every wish. And you are with me, every time. So beautiful! And afterwards—so good to be with you, next to you, feeling every breath you take, breathing in your smell, the one that's totally you, giving me peace. But what's even more wonderful is getting to be held by you, your arms around me. So good to have you near me.

Yes, we are in tune, belonging together.

Really?

Sincerely,

Anke

P.S. May I ask for contemporary, please?

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: hurt/comfort, enemies to lovers, men with pets, mentioning of power-exchange

Word Count: 43,373

CUP OF TEA AND A FEW BROKEN RULES

By C.C. Jaz

Nearly choking on my own panting breaths, my whole body shivers at the excellence of your questionable skills. Maybe anyone could have those skills. Maybe everybody does. Maybe anyone could touch me the way you touch me, but no one ever has. Not like this. Not in this selfish, rude, completely ignorant way, like right in this moment the only purpose for my existence in your bed is to wither and moan, be loud and do what I'm told. It is even more surprising, that right in this moment I want to do exactly what is expected of me. So touch me like you touch me, touch me so that dull ache erupts soon after, painful at first and quickly fading. It feels like blind, raging lust, the only type you give me. There's no other way for your touch; anything else would demand control and you have none to spare, you tell me. None to spare for pleasantries.

The universe was targeting Bailey. Clearly. Had it been impartial, Bailey wouldn't now feel like something had died in his mouth, and his back wouldn't be hurting, and his head wouldn't be aching. But since he was experiencing all of the characteristics of a devious hangover, it was clear the universe did not see eye to eye with Bailey on something.

The fact that he was suffering from a hangover for the first time in over three years wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that while his slightly drunken mind had gone haywire somewhere between sipping his beer and collapsing in bed, Bailey hadn't done a single thing to stop things from devolving. That was why he now woke up in someone else's bed with someone else's pillow tucked over his head and someone else's snoring ricocheting between his eardrums.

Tempted to close his eyes and pretend this wasn't happening, Bailey stayed still for a second, breathing through his nose and hoping yesterday's dinner wouldn't come up. After a while, as he fought to get a clear image of his surroundings, Bailey rushed into self-loathing and accusations, because he'd known this would happen. By the time he'd had his first shot seasoned with lime and salt, he should've gone home, because nothing good came out of shots. Ever. It could only get worse from there on. And unfortunately, unlike so

many people who said they just magically lost all recollections of things they'd done while under the influence of alcohol, Bailey's memory was crystal clear. This was why he now slid out of the bed and straight to the floor, never even bothering to look at the man still blissfully unaware of the tremendous aftermath just waiting to be tackled.

Crawling on the floor and hunting for his clothes, Bailey determinedly pushed away every image rushing into his mind. He didn't really need to remember how they'd made it from the club into the bed, and he especially didn't need the reminder of what could only be described as the most lusty few hours of his life. Generally speaking, lusty was good. If you asked Cam, she would say the human race would die without lust and it was only healthy to let the steam out every now and then. Bailey wasn't Cam, though. Bailey did not think getting drunk and jumping into bed with someone you didn't really know—and in this case could not stand—was a good thing. Just thinking about what had happened a few hours earlier made Bailey convinced he would never, *ever*, touch a bottle again. Unless it was water. Or soda. Or some very expensive brand of champagne, because no one said no to that, right?

Bailey's shirt was under the bed. He found his jeans under the nightstand and his left shoe was in the corner of the room. He maneuvered silently around the room, yanking on his sock with one hand while he sneaked into his shirt, and all the while his eyes scanned the room to locate his boxers. He could live without his other sock, but leave his underwear behind? Absolutely not.

Eventually his boxers appeared from under the blanket draped across the floor. Bailey was in the middle of covering his lower half when the lump under the sheets stretched across the bed and slowly turned over. The next few seconds were agonizingly slow; Bailey stood frozen, one pant leg pulled on while he squeezed the waistband of his jeans and stared at the man moving on the bed. Watching his latest piece of trouble balance between sleep and awareness, Bailey wondered how stupid people really were. If this was what those awkward morning afters were like, why on earth would people voluntarily get themselves into these situations? Bailey would not seek a repetition. Oh no, absolutely not. Casting a quick look towards the ceiling, he made a small prayer and promised to be good in the future if only he could get out of this one without being seen. He also decided that the next guy he slept with would be someone fit for more than a few hours of sex. He wouldn't go as far as to say he'd wait for "the one", because in the light of recent events he only seemed to draw in the jerks, but at least he could pick the best out of the scum.

The man on the bed was definitely not in the top three. Or top ten. The only enviable top-list he reached was the list of sex-on-legs. It had to be another one of the universe's ways of screwing with Bailey, that the first guy he ever slept with without dangling in months of relationship was this one.

Maybe he was a bit vain after all, he thought while slowly continuing to dress himself. He'd once sworn he would never fall for pathetic pick-up lines or those long gloomy glances, but seeing how he'd done pretty much just that the night before, he was obviously as easily manipulated as everybody else.

Bailey's nightly host didn't wake up but drifted off to sleep instead, leaving Bailey to gather his belongings from the floor. He found his wallet, his keys, and phone and even located that one missing sock. What he didn't find were his sunglasses and lip balm, both of which he was slightly obsessed with but still valued lower than his dignity, so he decided to leave them and head out instead. Vanity sneaked up on him when he was at the door, tempting him to take a quick look since he probably—*definitely*—wouldn't get another one anytime soon. Or ever, if it was up to him.

Quietly he opened the bedroom door, sneaked out and only then peeked back inside. And yes, it was every bit as good as he remembered. The wrapping, anyways. The inner being of the man still in bed was rotten and spoiled, and Bailey wanted nothing to do with that. But inches after inches of deeply tanned skin and limbs muscled just so were not nearly as appalling as he hoped they'd be.

After wandering over long limbs and peeks of naked skin over narrow hips and admirably well-shaped chest, Bailey's gaze finally landed on the man's face. Watching him now with sleep softening his looks and turning his features into something resembling amiable, it was almost impossible to remember the arrogant, self-sufficient, egoistic grin he wore ninety percent of the time. Emphasis on *almost*. Luckily Bailey did remember it, perfectly aware he'd probably see it the next time he'd be faced with this man. That was why it was ultimately so easy to turn around and walk out, the tang of sex and cigarettes following him all the way out to the street.

Now Bailey regretted leaving his shades behind. The sun was seriously messing with his eyesight.

The base, as Camille's parents' guesthouse was known these days, had gone through a major make-over. Six months ago, before any of this house renovating started, there had been a pool table and a widescreen TV and other

things Caden missed these days. Now there were leaflets and flip-charts and notes on tabletops and doorframes, as if anyone actually read through what was written.

When Caden got to the guesthouse on Sunday afternoon, the space looked even more chaotic than the last time he'd been there. The second he stepped inside, he had a feeling he was what caused the chaos.

"You're late." Ethan walked up to him, sighing listlessly. "Bailey's been going mad."

"Really?" Caden folded his sunglasses and hung them on the neckline of his T-shirt. He had another pair hidden in the front pocket of his jeans, just waiting to be passed on. "When does he *not* go mad?"

Ethan snorted, glancing around. "Camille and Rudy are coming later. I think Bailey wanted us here before they show up." "Us" being four people who, apparently, were all feeling Bailey's bad mood. Caden refused to take any blame on that; if anything, Bailey's mood should be superb after the attention he'd received during the night.

As if on cue, the blond swooshed into the room, a stack of small brochures held in his arms. Nothing was left of the drunken lust Caden had seen hours earlier. "You're forty-five minutes late." Nothing was left of the throaty moans either. Pity.

"What can I say...?" Caden smiled pleasantly. "I slept in... I was up all night."

Bailey blinked, hands still moving while he lowered the stack to the table placed in front of the window. "Well..." He cleared his throat before obtaining that holier-than-thou expression Caden really hated sometimes. Now it just managed to amuse him. After all, he'd had a glimpse of the sinful side of Bailey. And wasn't that side a feast for the eyes. And ears. And various body parts.

"That is no excuse," Bailey said sharply. "I expect you to be more punctual from now on."

"Oh, I will. I promise to come on time whenever you want me to." Oh, but it was fun. Bailey inhaled deeply, looking for a second like he didn't know how to act or what to say. It was so funny Caden nearly felt sorry for him. Nearly. The only reason why he didn't was the quick recovery which told him Bailey could wipe certain things off his mind just like that.

Jenny asked something Caden simply couldn't register, and Bailey was soon in conversation with her. Ethan snatched a note from the bureau placed near the door and rolled it between his fingers while watching Bailey. "They were talking about something with flowers before you got here."

"Anemones." Jeffrey now came to stand next to Ethan, looking distressed. "I swear I'm learning things I never knew before."

"What's the rush, anyways?" Ethan sighed and tossed the note back on the bureau. "The house's missing walls, and they're already talking about flowerbeds?"

"Please, don't start that conversation." Jeff shook his head. "I made the mistake of asking about it, and Jen gave me a speech about contracts and appointments and how planning ahead will pay off at the end..." He shuddered. "Just the thought of the list of things there's supposedly still left to do..."

Caden didn't know of the list; he hadn't bothered to check. He received the endless amount of emails sent to them, but usually he didn't read them. He would be a good boy and help out when help was needed, but other than that, he was not going to stress himself over someone else's house project. Fortunately for them all, Bailey seemed to like stressing over things like that. That was probably why he now glared sourly across the room. "Would the three of you like to participate or did you just come here for the food?"

Both Ethan and Jeff straightened up, like someone had just added an inch or two of length in their spines. Bailey wasn't fooled, though. He shook his head, looking positively displeased. "Fine... there're burgers in the kitchen. You've got fifteen minutes."

Ethan was the first to follow the order. "Thank you, sir." He was soon followed by Jeff, who from the looks of it tried to explain his lack of concentration to Jenny. Caden wasn't hungry so he stayed behind. A few moments later Bailey noticed this as well.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

Caden shook his head and finally left the door. "Nah... I had a late breakfast." Two cups of coffee wasn't really breakfast but if it was up to him, he'd skip breakfast altogether and not leave bed until it was time for dinner.

With each step Caden took, Bailey took one back. It was silly, since nothing was going to happen, but Caden was glad he got some sort of reaction from the guy, other than the spiteful remarks that were quite typical by now.

“You left early,” he said nonchalantly and made a production out of straightening the piled brochures on the table.

“Can we not talk about this here?”

“Why not?” Caden glanced towards the closed kitchen door. “They won’t hear us.”

“That’s beside the point. I just don’t want to talk about it.” Bailey stared back stubbornly, his hazel eyes firm on Caden. “Ever.”

“I think it’s something that should definitely be addressed.” Caden ran his eyes over Bailey’s appearance, his dark green long-sleeved tee and white loose pants fitting in perfectly next to the flower-pattern curtains and light yellow rugs. “Or do you often go home with someone and simply vanish in the morning.”

“That is none of your business,” Bailey said formally.

“And why’s that?”

“Because it’s personal.”

Caden chuckled softly, cocking his brow. “I had your cock in my mouth less than twelve hours ago. Now *that’s* personal. This is debriefing.”

Bailey’s eyes widened as if Caden had just said something completely horrendous. “You’re disgusting.”

“That’s not what you said last night.” Caden leaned a little closer, now definitely in Bailey’s personal space. He lowered his voice, eyes held on Bailey’s. “Oh, Caden. That’s it, Caden. Right there, Caden,” he drawled, aiming for the specific tone Bailey had used quite skillfully. Bailey didn’t seem to appreciate the rendezvous. He shook his head quickly and took a step away from Caden. “Shut up, right now.”

“No... I don’t think you said that. What you did say was—”

“I was drunk, so whatever I said or didn’t say really doesn’t matter.” Bailey started to fix the table, organizing the brochures and other papers he’d probably brought earlier. Caden stood still, watching the man work. “You were not drunk. Tippy, maybe, but not drunk. I wouldn’t have slept with you if you’d been drunk. That would be irresponsible, and I don’t swing that way.”

“Either way, I was not thinking straight last night.” Bailey stood up and turned towards Caden. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t tell anyone what

happened.” Well of course he would. They’d been at each other’s throats for as long as Caden could remember, so no wonder Bailey didn’t want this to become the next rumor for their close set of friends to gossip about. Caden wasn’t too fond of gossip either. It was other things he liked.

“You know what’s funny?” he mumbled absently. “Ever since I saw you for the first time, I’ve had this desire to just bend you over and give you a good old spanking. And what do you know, it almost happened.”

Bailey’s eyes widened, his full but never pouty lips parting. “What? You didn’t—”

“Oh, I know.” Caden waved his hand dismissively. “It was really just a little slap but still...” He watched Bailey’s face turn scarlet, unable to hide what the sight did to him. “I never would’ve thought that’s something you get off on.”

“I did *not*—” Bailey began, but then shook his head. “Last night... I...” He shook his head again, as if to straighten his thoughts. “It shouldn’t have happened. We... this... never should’ve happened.”

Caden stepped closer when Bailey went to move away. He didn’t make the mistake of touching the man, but apparently it was enough that he suddenly stood so close. Bailey stilled, first looking away before his eyes met Caden’s. “Tell me it didn’t feel good,” Caden said quietly. He’d had enough one-night stands to know how sex could literally mean nothing, and this wasn’t about bonding for life. He just wanted recognition, something that told him he’d managed to give something to someone instead of take something away. “Tell me you didn’t like it, and I’ll never bother you again.” That was a lot to promise since bothering Bailey was one of the funniest things Caden could think of. Right now though, with this completely new and absurd aspect of their relationship, Caden decided to do the right thing. Or at least try.

Bailey didn’t answer. He just stared back with those deer-in-headlights eyes of his, looking like someone who had very little brain activity going on. That was enough of an answer to Caden.

He pulled the folded shades from his pocket and held them out for Bailey. “You forgot these.”

Bailey glanced at the glasses, then took them carefully so that there was no contact between his skin and Caden’s. “Thank you,” he said politely, always so polite, and stepped back. “For returning them.”

“You’re welcome.”

Bailey opened his mouth as if to say something, but then Cam barged in, her arms braced beneath small bags and boxes. Bailey quickly stepped back, eyes downcast and evading Caden.

“Oh, hi.” Cam smiled breathlessly and rushed to the table where she lowered her carryings. “Are you two the only ones here?”

Caden nodded towards the kitchen and took a deliberate step back. “They’re eating.”

“Right... food comes first.” Cam stood in Caden’s way so that it was impossible for him to have a clear view of Bailey. What he did see told him the conversation was over, and Bailey had already returned to his normal mode; always the busy beaver.

“Rudy’s bringing in paint samples and fabrics and stuff. We got a discount on the fabrics, so I was thinking maybe we could go a little overboard with the tiles in the bathroom.”

Caden stood and watched while Bailey engaged in a conversation with Cam. Quickly the two started their sixth sense communication which consisted of a lot of words and gestures an outsider couldn’t understand, something they probably did without even realizing it. Caden was spared from standing there like an idiot when Rudy came in, his face twisted into an agonized frown.

“Mind giving me a hand?”

Caden took a few of the stacked fabrics from his friend’s hands and carried them to the table. Sideways, he glanced at Bailey and found the man looking back. Quickly Bailey’s eyes averted, a worried frown on his face. So he thought Caden was going to make things difficult for him.

Silly Bailey.

Bailey had met Caden for the first time on his twenty-fourth birthday. His first impression of the guy had been pretty superficial, nothing but the looks and perfectly sustained appearance catching his attention. The blooming attraction had withered and died the second Caden had opened his mouth; it was easy to replace every word with “me, me, me”. Bailey had never in his life met a person with such an over-bloated ego, and those hormone-colored shades had dropped and shattered right there and then. Of course, for every guy who found Caden obnoxious, there was at least a dozen who found him irresistible,

and no matter how obvious Bailey's dislike was, Caden thrived on the attention and admiration of those who drooled over his very existence. During the past four years, Bailey had laughed himself sick watching the endless line of men all sizes and shapes trying to win over Caden's heart. Someone should probably tell them that Caden had no heart and the only organ willing to warm up to them was the one hanging between his legs. Bailey had lived through and eventually ended a relationship of his own, for the first time ever feeling a little uncertain in Caden's presence, because being alone was suddenly a frightening thing, and someone with such confidence as Caden only made the terror worse. And true to his being, Caden had made the most of Bailey's post-committed state, having no mercy when it came to reminding Bailey of the things he lacked now.

Maybe that was why he'd been stupid enough to wander off into the wrong bed. Maybe *that* was why it had been so incredibly good. Maybe cheap sex was better than no sex at all, and maybe a random, unfamiliar body, in this case a body with delicious details but filthy habits, was better than nobody at all.

"I'm on the rebound." Bailey stared at his reflection, hair sticking up and toothpaste smudged around his lips and his left eyelid puffy and red after he'd passed out on the bed with his head nearly swallowed by the pillows. "That's gotta be it."

Why else would he think sleeping with Caden was a good idea? Had been... whatever. Not that he thought that, because seriously, it was the most idiotic thing he'd ever done. But theoretically, if he thought it was a good thing, it was only because of what he was doing, not because of who he was doing it with. Besides, wasn't rebound sex just a way to ventilate? Move on and find substance that had been yanked away by cruel ex-partners.

Bailey rinsed his mouth and fixed his hair, all the while thinking how one time did not predict years of behavior. Everybody was allowed one or two mistakes. This was his first one. And he had been drunk, or tipsy like Caden said. Either way, his judgment had been lacking, therefore he couldn't really be held responsible for his actions.

By the time he'd gone through his morning rituals, Bailey felt a lot better. One time never killed anyone. Not even if that one time consisted of a number of individual times. *Many individual times*, he thought absently, wondering why this was the first time he'd ever spent the entire night doing nothing but rolling in the sheets and seeking contact with someone equally naked. Then an

image of Caden's admirable nakedness flashed through his mind, and Bailey shook it off quickly. No need to go back there.

Forty-five minutes later, he was in the hall of Cam's house. Technically it was also Rudy's house, but recently he'd lost interest in anything other than the budget, so Bailey figured it was safe to say the true mastery over the premise belonged to Camille. It was a standard two-story detached town house, layers of moss and sand giving a nice shade of age on the outside while the inside of the house looked pretty destroyed. The renovations had started weeks ago and right now, every room and corner looked unfinished, but that did not mean Cam would let anybody slack on the job. She'd originally asked if they'd help with the painting and moving in furniture and things like that, but after going through one rug shop after another and haggling for overpriced kitchen cupboards, it was safe to say Bailey was doing a lot more than his share. Still, the look on Cam's face as Bailey reached the second-floor bathroom was what made it impossible for him to say no; she looked like a part of her life had just returned to her, all smiles and hugs the second she bounced up from the floor.

"Have you had breakfast already?" she asked while pulling away. Her hair was braided, a denim overall making her look very down-to-business and ready-to-get-her-hands-dirty, but the large golden earrings and that skillfully laid make-up told Bailey she was ready to make an appearance if needed.

"I brought some coffee and bagels and stuff like that with me." Cam left the room, pulling Bailey along. "The guys are coming here in about an hour, and I know by noon they'll bitch about being hungry so that's taken care of."

"Who's coming, exactly?" Bailey had thought he'd get a Caden-free day, and now the prospect of spending even a few short moments with the guy dropped his mood.

"Everybody." She picked up a few discarded cardboard sheets on her way downstairs, speaking over her shoulder. "I thought we'd move all this crap outside so that when the dumpster gets here on Monday, we could just clear everything out quickly."

All Bailey heard was "we", and he realized he wouldn't have trouble coming up with stuff to do for the next week or so.

They'd cleared the hall by the time "everybody" got to the house. Bailey was only partly aware of the pats on his shoulder and greeting smiles. What he was more than aware of was Caden's presence the moment the man stepped

into the room. They shared a casual “hey”, then went to work, but all the while, Bailey’s focus wavered between Caden and picking up junk from the floors.

Usually they’d remain on their own parts of the working site and only bother acknowledging each other if one did something irritating enough for the other to notice. Now Bailey’s eyes trained across the room, across the back yard, across whatever length of distance there was between them, and every single time Caden was looking back. Bailey would look away and then a few moments later their eyes would meet again. This went on through the entire day. No matter how hard Bailey tried, he couldn’t convince his brain to work properly and focus on work. Just knowing Caden was somewhere in the house, at times out of Bailey’s sight and at times standing right next to him, made Bailey’s instincts super alert. Bailey tasted none of his bagels or the onion rings he ate with sour cream after they ordered dinner later that day. His focus was on everything except his food; on the way Caden practically moaned at the taste of his burger, or how the man licked the tips of his fingers clean after finishing his dinner, or how the hem of his black punk-shirt rose dangerously high while he raised his arm to sip his can of soda.

It was safe to say Bailey’s libido was racing by the time he headed home. He barely managed to stay civilized while saying his farewells to Cam and Rudy who stayed at the house, the couple already making plans for the next day. Eventually Bailey got out, sweaty and headachy and with sore muscles. And the first thing he saw was Caden leaning against the side of his car parked at the curb.

Caden’s arms were crossed over his chest, the dusty shade of his black shirt continuing down along his black jeans. He was sort of grunge with a blend of punk-rock, a choice of style Bailey personally found very troublesome. It had to be a real task to make that look work, yet Caden somehow managed to do it without any noticeable efforts.

Walking down a few steps, Bailey peered at Caden. “Didn’t you leave like an hour ago?”

“I got caught with Jeff. Then I thought I’d stick around for a while and see if I could offer you a ride.” With that cheeky grin painted across his features, Caden looked every bit like the player Bailey knew he was. At the time, Bailey was only worried Cam might look out of the window and see them on the street.

“Thanks for the offer, but I’ll walk.” He skipped down the rest of the stairs and was totally prepared to head down the street, but the frown of concern on Caden’s face prevented him from moving any further than the pavement. “It’ll get dark soon. Sure it’s safe to walk alone at this hour?”

Bailey glanced around, then up at the light blue sky. “It won’t be dark for another couple of hours.”

“Still... wandering around the city all by yourself... sure you wanna risk it?”

Bailey was fairly sure it was safer than getting in the car with Caden, and still, *still*, he just stood there, his feet refusing to follow a simple order to move. “If I go back inside will you be gone by the time I come outside again?”

“That depends...”

“On...?”

Caden shrugged motionlessly, dark eyes narrowed slightly, but the intensity in his gaze hadn’t changed once throughout the entire evening. “On whether or not you really want me gone.”

Bailey snorted disbelievingly. “You got some nerve.”

“Admit it...” Caden stood up, hands lowered by his sides. He was a good couple of inches taller than Bailey, but his height had nothing to do with the spell he seemed to bind around Bailey. It was the way he looked at Bailey, the way his gaze seemed to sneak beneath Bailey’s jeans and cotton sweatshirt and lick him all over. “You think I’m charming.”

Bailey tilted his chin up and smiled kindly. “I think you’re delusional.”

Caden nodded shortly, his barely-even-a-smile expression radiating poorly concealed amusement. “And charming.” And he was, though Bailey couldn’t say why. He didn’t like arrogant men, or men who made him irritated, or men who barged into his life and made living a challenge. But Caden *was* charming. And while this little detail annoyed the ever-living crap out of Bailey, he couldn’t deny the attraction.

“Do you always like bullying people until you get what you want?” he asked curtly, causing Caden’s brows to rise towards his dark hairline.

“Me?” he marveled. “Bullying? No, no... you misunderstood.” He spread his arms almost ceremonially. “I’m only here to escort you home.”

“Right...” Bailey tilted his head to the side, aiming a displeased glare at Caden. “Didn’t I just ask you to relocate yourself?”

Caden frowned thoughtfully. “No... you asked if I would, and then I asked if you really wanted me to. Which, by the way, you failed to answer.” The man stepped closer, then closer still, the tips of their shoes probably touching by the time he stopped moving. “Now what does that tell you?”

Bailey could smell cigarettes and sweat and dust, and he didn’t like any of those separately and especially not together, but somehow they worked well with his system now.

“You may drive me home,” he said firmly. “With no detours.”

Caden’s lips curved up into what could only be described as the most devious expression Bailey had ever seen on anyone. “Of course not.”

Even as Bailey got in the car, his brain kept shouting commands he completely failed to obey. That’s how stupid he really was.

Regardless of the stiffness in his back and the annoying strain in his neck, Caden’s mood couldn’t have been better. It was the kind of rush you get after a really hard workout when your body’s feeble and pumped up at the same time. With no problems whatsoever, Caden got up after his favorite type of physical exercise and wandered into the kitchen. He could hear the litany of curses he left behind and couldn’t help but to smirk at the sight welcoming him once he returned with a bottle of water. “That was fun.” He wouldn’t have minded a shower beforehand but hey... Caden was never one to complain.

“Oh my god.”

He leaned against the doorframe and opened the bottle. “I mean...” He shrugged and sipped the water. “Could there be a better way to finish off a weekend?”

Still on the bed, Bailey’s head was hidden under a pillow he kept squeezing against his face. “Oh my god!” It sounded funny coming through the pillow, but Caden figured the guy had some adjusting to do. Perhaps Bailey wasn’t used to expressing himself in such sexual, liberated ways. God knows the guy he used to date was stiff as wood and not in a good way. That guy probably didn’t do sex before ten p.m. and definitely not on top of the covers.

Caden sipped his water and stepped up to the bed. After listening to Bailey’s pathetic whines through the pillow, he simply yanked it off and threw

it on the floor. With a pleased smile he looked down at Bailey. "Ready for that debriefing now?"

Well, this wasn't working.

For the fourth weekend in a row Bailey found himself sprawled across Caden's bed, his limbs nearly numb after unfolding from the tangle Caden had somehow managed to twist him into. Caden had left the bed as soon as his cock had started to soften, which was about ten minutes ago, but Bailey feared he was permanently incapable of moving. All he could do was stare up at the ceiling and damn himself.

Apparently one time wasn't enough. Or two. Judging from the approximately fifteen different ways Caden could turn Bailey's brain into mush, Bailey wasn't only easily manipulated. He was really, *really* stupid as well. And without any self-preservation.

An unopened bottle of water appeared in his line of vision. "You want some?"

Bailey glanced to his side and immediately closed his eyes, his hand held tightly over his eyes. "Please put some clothes on."

"Why?"

"Because you're naked!" Was this guy dumb or something? Bailey breathed deeply, to calm himself, and quickly felt around his own body which, luckily, was covered. And apparently Caden still stood by the bed instead of running to his closet and covering his shameless yet well-defined body. "I think you've seen me naked before."

Rolling his eyes behind closed lids, Bailey sighed deeply. "We're not having sex right now." Soon he felt a small tug on the sheet spread hastily over his body. "We could be," Caden murmured, probably aiming for seductive, but at the time, he only managed to provoke Bailey's bad mood.

Still clutching his left hand over his eyes, Bailey held on to the sheet with his right. "Clothes. Now." Nearly holding his breath, Bailey listened carefully until he heard the heavy sigh—a sign of frustration, perhaps—and sounds of clothes getting pulled from the closet. Bailey released a soundless breath of relief. Maybe he could handle himself if Caden was dressed. Hell... maybe he could handle *Caden* if Caden was dressed. Bailey risked a quick peek and

realized there was no such thing as handling happening here. Caden might be dressed—if a pair of jeans that should've been burned years ago and a washed-out band shirt from the glory days of some '80s rock band classified as clothes—but he still radiated such sex appeal Bailey decided it was best if he concentrated on other things than Caden's enviable characteristics.

“Mind giving me mine too?” he asked, hand still held over his eyes. He had a vague idea where his clothes were, but right now he was not going to run around the apartment and hunt for them, seeing how they most likely were not in the bedroom. Still, something soft landed over Bailey's arm and once he investigated the garment tossed his way, he realized it wasn't his. It was Caden's. The idea of wearing it was severely disturbing. “*My clothes,*” Bailey repeated slowly and held the shirt as far away from him as possible while he held it out for Caden.

Bailey's boxer briefs were flung on the bed. “Your shirt's in the washer.” Caden glanced over his shoulder. “Pants too.” He rolled his eyes when Bailey was about to ask if the program was correct. “Yeah yeah... no bleach, no tumble-dry... yadda yadda yadda.” The man picked up the bottle he'd left on the nightstand, opened it and took a long sip.

The insult about Bailey's reasonable and totally justified concerns for fabric maintenance didn't bother him nearly as much as Caden's staring did. “Could you turn around?” he asked, locking eyes with Caden who frowned.

“Why?”

“Because I'm going to get dressed.”

Caden lowered the bottle, still standing by the bed. “You've got to be kidding me.”

“No, I'm completely serious. Now, please turn around so I can get dressed.”

They stared at one another, Bailey remaining perfectly calm while Caden's expression turned more and more disbelieving by the second. Eventually he turned around, shaking his head. “Don't you think this is a little ridiculous?” he asked over his shoulder while Bailey squirmed into his briefs. “I have seen you naked, you know.”

“That's completely irrelevant.”

“No, no... see, I like you naked.” Caden nodded, probably to himself. “In fact, I like you a lot better naked rather than with your clothes on.”

“That’s gross.”

“Yet true.” Caden glanced over his shoulder. “Can I turn around *now*?”

Squirming into the shirt, one too black, too old, and definitely too Caden for his taste, Bailey sat up against the bedpost, folding the sheets over his still-naked lower half. “Yes, you can turn around now.” Bailey pretended not to notice the eye-rolling once Caden saw the modesty placed on the bed. Bailey might be willing to interact in sexual activities with this guy, but there was no reason for him to continue that odd behavior once the deed was done. Therefore, he had no reason to lounge around naked. Apparently, the guys Caden usually had in his bed didn’t mind doing just that.

Bailey had other things in mind.

“We need to make some rules.”

Caden had emptied the entire bottle by now and was screwing the cap back in place while frowning down at Bailey. “What rules?”

Bailey gestured around. “About this.”

“About *what*?”

Praying for patience, Bailey sighed deep. “This arrangement of ours.” Sometime during the past few weeks Bailey had realized this situation they were in might not pass by as quickly as he’d hoped, and the best way to handle more or less permanent phases was to set firm rules. That way there would be no nasty surprises or unwanted turn of events. Unfortunately Caden didn’t seem to think that way.

“Why would we need rules?” he asked, frowning. “Rules with something like this cross badly with the whole concept of ‘casual’. You’re spoiling the casualness.”

“Trust me, it’ll be better this way.” Bailey could work with this sex thing, but the true trouble of this arrangement wasn’t the one standing by the bed. It was the one now jumping on the bed and then glaring maliciously at Bailey.

“Rule number one; keep that thing away from me.”

Caden huffed offendedly, glaring at Bailey, while he circled the bed and picked up that fifteen-pound monster seriously intruding on Bailey’s personal space. “Do not listen to him, Kitty.” The more he said it, the more absurd it sounded. Bailey stared at the cat and its completely delirious owner, unsure whether he was bothered by the feline breathing the same air as him or the

untypical expression of *fondness* emerging into Caden's repertoire every time that monster was in his sight.

"That thing doesn't like me."

"No," Caden said firmly and sat on the bed. "You don't like her."

Bailey was sure it was impossible to like that fluffy, mean-looking thing now happily clinging to the front of Caden's shirt. The "cat" was in need of a diet, an attitude change, and behavior therapy. The fact that Caden called it Kitty only made the monster look more and more vicious.

"I like animals, just so you know. It's that thing that doesn't like me."

Caden snorted and leaned back against the bedpost, gently combing his fingers through the monster's long smoky-white fur. "She's got standards."

"Then apparently you do not." Bailey scooted to the edge of the bed, careful not to lose sight of the monster. He hadn't complained about the more recreational scratching Caden occasionally did during the night, but he didn't want those killer claws anywhere near him. "So long as that thing doesn't try to make acquaintance with me, I'm happy."

"I don't think that'll be a problem."

"Good. Now..." Bailey crossed his legs beneath the sheets and turned slightly towards Caden. "Rule number two: you cannot, under any circumstances, tell anyone about what's going on."

"Like I would ever voluntarily throw myself to the wolves." The man glanced at Bailey, smirking apologetically. "No offense, but getting associated with your nitpicking isn't something I'd volunteer for."

It was Bailey's turn to stare wide-eyed. "My nitpicking?"

"Believe me, you're the most fastidious person I've ever met." Caden frowned thoughtfully. "You should probably try to work on that."

"I am not fastidious." Bailey crossed his arms over his chest and fixed his posture. "I'm just... punctual."

Caden nodded agreeably. "Aha." He nodded towards Bailey. "Is that why you sit there with your nose stuck up, looking like someone just pissed in your cereal?"

Bailey gushed. "That phrase is disgusting."

Caden chuckled. "You're doing it again."

“Doing what?”

“Complaining. Whining. That phrase is disgusting.” Caden mimicked Bailey so it was almost funny. “It’s not supposed to be appetizing, you know.” They held eyes for a few seconds, during which Caden’s eyes narrowed slightly and he obtained a calculating tiny grin. “Why did you and that guy break up?”

The change in subject was so sudden Bailey’s mind went blank for a few seconds. “What?”

“That guy you were with... what was his name... Lloyd, Larry...”

“Liam.” It didn’t hurt to say the name though Bailey had avoided the topic quite skillfully since their break-up a couple of months ago. Not that he was hurt or anything.

Caden snapped his fingers. “Liam! Yes, him.” He looked strangely serious while turning his eyes on Bailey. “Now that guy...” Caden shook his finger in a lecturing manner. “Boring as hell. Weren’t you guys together for quite long? A year or something?”

Bailey shrugged dismissively. “Nineteen months.” Not that he’d counted.

“Right. Must’ve felt at least twice as long. No wonder you’re a little too self-conscious. Even I would be if I’d been dating a stuck-up like that guy.”

“I liked him,” Bailey mumbled defensively. No need to say he wasn’t self-conscious because he was, even more so after every time he woke up in Caden’s bed. It seemed he was acting completely unlike himself these days.

“Oh that’s sweet,” Caden cooed. “You *liked* him. You went out with him for a year and a half and all you have to say is you *liked* him? Shouldn’t there be something a bit more there, like... I don’t know... love?”

“Love?” Bailey shook his head with a mocking chuckle. “And what exactly would you know about that?”

Cade hissed quietly. “Harsh.” Then he leaned back against the bedpost. “But true. Why love anyone else when there’s so much to love about me?”

There it was, the simple essence of this man. And Bailey still found it repulsive though under different circumstances that quality turned him on like mad. “Do you have any idea how self-centered that sounds?”

Caden shrugged dismissively, hand continuing the lazy strokes over the beast’s fur. “I never claimed to be modest.” A cunning sharpness returned to his eyes. “So why did you and Liam break up?”

It was Bailey's turn to build up his defenses. "That's none of your business."

"Oh... touchy." Caden grinned mockingly. "I always thought you and that yuppie were a perfect match."

"He was not a yuppie." Why did he bother? It was stupid to think Caden would appreciate things like sophistication or consideration in other people. He sure as hell had none of those attributes himself. "Besides, my past, current, or future relationships and whatever people I date are none of your concern, so I'm not going to talk about this with you." The fact that thinking about Liam was still a little hard on Bailey's nerves had nothing to do with his reluctance towards talking about the man. There was simply no point in talking about it with Caden. "Off to rule number three..."

"Enough with the rules."

"Rule number three..." Bailey continued as if he hadn't even heard Caden. "This, whatever this is, stays in the bedroom."

"You're just stating self-evident facts," Caden said sourly, looking like the topic itself was boring enough to lull him to sleep. "Sex with you is surprisingly enjoyable, but apart from that..." He shrugged, looking distracted. "Let's just say you're not exactly my type."

"Shocker." Bailey smirked dryly. "At least we're on the same page about something."

"That's a first."

Bailey leaned his head back against the wall, suddenly feeling too tired to continue the list of rules he had planned in his head. They still had to talk about public innuendos which seemed to be Caden's favorites, and the frequent phases of nudity that happened in Caden's home. Bailey didn't oppose nudity; he just didn't like anyone shoving their naked selves in his face. Those were all issues he could attack some other time. Right now he was more interested in getting properly dressed, getting fed, and getting sleep. The order of things was secondary.

"Why are my clothes in the washer?" he asked, now annoyed by the lack of clothing. "I should start getting home."

"Tomato sauce," Caden commented shortly. Bailey nodded when he remembered the pizza box which had landed in his lap the second Caden had squeezed his ass earlier that day. Or was it last night? "Oh, right."

“You can sleep here.” Caden stood up, that fluffy beast still tangled around his arms. “We gotta head to the supply store in the morning, right? It’ll save me gas, not having to pick you up.”

“I can’t sleep here.”

“Why not?”

“Because you snore.” It was quite awful really. Like someone was sawing logs next to Bailey’s ear. “And you have no milk.”

“What the hell does milk have to do with it?”

“I need my morning coffee, and that tar you claim to be coffee can’t be digested without at least a gallon of milk.”

Caden lowered his beloved pet to the floor, shaking his head. “God, you’re high-maintenance. No wonder Liam took off.” Bailey was left watching Caden’s departure as the man left the room. It was true, it had been Liam who had left, and however much Bailey wished he could say Caden’s comments didn’t bother him, they sometimes did when they were so perfectly aimed. It was a good thing he was left alone for a moment, otherwise Caden might’ve noticed how he’d managed to find another way to get under Bailey’s skin. That was not ammo Bailey was willing to give to this guy.

A few minutes later Caden appeared by the door, his phone in hand. “I’m gonna order in. Thai. You want some?”

Bailey’s brain said no, but his stomach growled a very demanding yes. “Yeah, why not?” He wanted to get out of bed but the thought of walking around half-naked was disturbing enough to cripple him under the sheets. Caden seemed to notice this as well.

“Are you gonna stay in bed the whole evening?” he asked, seemingly casual, but there was no mistaking the intrigued tone. Bailey shrugged, mind racing to come up with a clever plan to get himself out of Caden’s bed.

“Oh... I know.” The phone rattled on the nightstand as soon as Caden reached the bed. “Bailey’s feeling a little shy,” he cooed, now standing at the foot of the bed.

Bailey sighed, rolling his eyes at Caden’s peculiar smirk. “I’m not feeling shy. I just don’t see any reason in strutting around like someone else I know.” He soon realized Caden didn’t care for his explanations, and Caden especially didn’t care for any halfhearted insults. The man leaned over the bed, hands

close to where Bailey's feet were under the sheets. And then those hands were beneath the light fabric, climbing up along Bailey's calves while Caden lowered himself onto the bed. "We don't have to leave the bed."

"I thought you said you were going to order food." Stupidity kicked in, and Bailey didn't even try to move when Caden crawled closer, soon looming over Bailey and leaning so close Bailey could smell the scent of freshly smoked cigarette on Caden's breath. "I can always do that later."

Still fighting for control, though the simple idea was insane when this man was concerned, Bailey held still, refusing to look away. "Don't you ever think about anything else but sex?"

"What can I say...? I'm an opportunist." Gruff denim scratched against Bailey's sensitive skin when the sheets just slipped off and suddenly walking around half-naked wasn't nearly as terrifying as being in bed half-naked. At least while walking he was doing something other than being mounted by Caden. Not that there was anything particularly bad about being mounted by Caden. It was surprisingly enjoyable.

Caden had always appreciated his privacy. Even when he was younger and his siblings had made it impossible to actually have any privacy in the house, Caden had always found a way to excuse himself. It might've not always been polite, but at least it got the job done. When he'd left home at the glamorous age of eighteen, he'd relished the thought of living his life the way he'd wanted to live it—without anyone's nagging disturbing his plans and ideas of how one's life should be lived. Stubbornness had led into months and years of living from hand to mouth, at times bunking on someone's couch when he'd been stupid enough to blow all of his money on things other than bills and rent. Stupidity had taught him to stick with what he wanted, regardless of the momentary tough spots. He still valued his freedom higher than the possibility of the finer things in life. And somehow, during those rebellious years, he'd met Ethan, and Ethan being the social butterfly that he was, it hadn't taken too long for their group of two to expand into this weird cluster of people they were these days. At times it was almost suffocating being surrounded by people who expected everybody's business to be their business and sometimes the herd mentality got on Caden's nerves, but he still appreciated his friends.

For now, Caden was left to his own company in the backyard with nothing but lunch wrappers keeping him company. Jeff and Jenny had left about an

hour ago, but Caden expected them to be back later that evening. From the sounds coming through the open back door, he could tell there were still some busy beavers left in the house. Cam's voice rang louder than anyone else's, her high-pitched tone giving sharp yet gentle instructions about tapestry and wall paints. It made Caden smile; he bet Rudy never knew what he was signing himself up for when those two tied the knot two years earlier. It had been a nice wedding. Small, accompanied by only close friends and family members. Cam had spent an insane amount of money on flowers, but other than that, everything had been pretty low-key. There was nothing low-key about the plans made for the house. Caden only hoped the couple wouldn't change their minds within the next year and decide they wanted to move again. Caden would not sign up for that.

Fast-paced steps intruded on Caden's solitude, the forthcoming encounter dampening his mood. Glancing over his shoulder, Caden saw Cam tap her way through the barely finished porch and then down the stairs. Her hair was a mess, her bright red overalls colored with dust, and it said something about her state of mind that her eyes were practically gleaming at the sight of Caden's soda cup.

"Is there still ice in that?" She nearly flew across the yard, which was saying a lot with her rounded belly. No really, it was bordering gigantic. Caden nodded, barely able to hide his amusement. "Some." He handed the cup to Cam once she slumped in the chair next to his.

"I hate summer." She literally tore off the cap and didn't seem to mind the left-over soda drizzling on her fingers when she tipped the ice on her palm. "I seriously hate the summer." She brought up her hand, sighing when cold ice hit the skin on the side of her neck. "Oh, but this is good."

Caden watched her pleasurable rubbing session, vaguely aware of the moan-like sounds she was making. "I'm pretty sure this is what some men call a fantasy."

Cam looked at him, ice melting against her skin and water glistening down along her neck. "I'm sweaty, I stink, I've got putty all over my hair, and I look like an obese whale. There are no men in this world who would find this even remotely appealing." She waved her hand over her grown abdomen, then sighed and dropped her hand while the other continued relieving whatever symptoms the heat produced on her system. "Plus Rudy keeps treating me like I'm handicapped, so I'm officially not good for anything."

Seeing how Caden had never been pregnant, and he'd never had the dubious pleasure of being in any way involved with a woman in such condition, he had very little leverage for sympathizing. He did, however, see the logic in Rudy's opinion. "Cam... you're six months pregnant."

She glared at him. "Do you think our ancestors would rest on their laurels? Is *that* how great nations were made and hardships were overcome? No, it was not." She looked so severely pissed off Caden didn't have to balls to tell her renovating a house and building nations weren't one hundred percent compatible. Instead he decided to play it dirty, aiming directly at Cam's weak point. "You're probably right. But I can understand Rudy's point too." He shrugged when Cam glared at him. "See, it's love that makes him act a little overprotective sometimes. You and the baby are the two most important things in the world for him. I can't even imagine how he'd feel if something happened to either one of you." Casually he stretched his arms before folding them behind his head.

Cam stared at him, looking irritated. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing."

"And what is that?"

"Being... you," she muttered, pointing a finger at Caden, but the annoyance slowly melted away, leaving her looking tired and worried. "I know he only means well." She glanced over her shoulder at the house, both hands now folded in her lap. "I just want the house to be ready for the baby, and I feel like we're running out of time."

"It'll be ready." Caden nodded when Cam looked at him concernedly. "Just trust me when I say that the house will be ready by the time you carry that cute little baby of yours home from the hospital." It was a lot to promise, but Caden never went back on his promises. He decided he should read those emails ASAP. He cocked his brow, staring back at Cam. "Will you stop worrying now?"

She rolled her eyes. "Fine." She looked down at her stomach, right hand brought over her round belly protectively. "I just hope our little girl won't make a sudden appearance." She smiled warmly. "She's moving. It's like she knows whenever I'm talking about her."

"I think she actually can."

Cam nodded, then looked up. "Do you wanna try?"

“Sure.”

She reached out her hand, took hold of Caden's and placed it against her belly, directly above where Caden imagined her bellybutton being. He was hesitant to add any pressure, which apparently was funny to Cam. “You have to push a little bit.” She pressed Caden's hand tighter against her belly, moving an inch or two to find the right spot. At first there was nothing, and then Caden felt the tiniest little flutter right beneath his palm. It felt like something drawing an invisible line across his palm, the sensation so frail he could barely breathe because of the fear of losing it.

“Wow.” He turned sideways on his chair, completely mesmerized by the feathering brushes beneath his hand. It was a baby, an actual living creature floating inside someone's belly. Knowing it was totally different from actually feeling it. “That's crazy.”

“I know, right?” Cam's hand swept down along the side of her stomach. “It felt surreal with the test and the doctors and ultrasounds but when I really felt her for the first time, I realized there's really someone in there.”

Caden looked at her, at her downcast eyes, moist and blue. Bailey might say Caden didn't know much about love and maybe that was true, but it was impossible to overlook the infinite mother's love beaming from Cam's eyes. That he knew. That he would've recognized anywhere.

“You're gonna be a great mom,” he said, unprepared for the intensity in Cam's eyes when she looked at him. “And your baby is gonna be one lucky kid to have parents like you and Rudy.”

Cam stared back, immobile, until her bottom lip started quivering and the moistness in her eyes turned into a gentle waterfall. “Damn...” She sniffed and fished out a paper napkin from the pocket of her overalls. “I thought I could go one day without bawling my eyes out, but apparently not.”

Caden chuckled, feeling a little bit emotional himself. “I guess it comes with the territory.”

Cam laughed quietly, wiping her eyes. Caden pulled back at the sound of approaching footsteps. Rudy skipped down the stairs, frowning concernedly at the sight of his crying wife. “Hormonal or due to the circumstances?”

“I'd say more of the first.”

Rudy's hands stroked along Cam's shoulders when he reached the chair. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Cam nodded and looked up at him. "I'm fine. Just my daily dose of water works." She smiled meaningfully at Caden before standing up. "But maybe we should all go home." She nodded at Rudy's surprised expression, squirming under his arm and tightly against his side. "How about we call it a night and tomorrow you guys can come here and do whatever you do, and I could maybe go shopping for curtains or something?"

"Curtains?" Rudy seemed confused. He glanced at Caden, then at Bailey who now stood at the bottom of the stairs. His eyes drifted back to Cam who didn't seem to notice her husband's confusion.

"Curtains and rugs and pottery. Stuff like that. If Bailey could come with me?"

The blond at the end of the stairs nodded, looking way too pristine and clean in his spotless jeans and striped tee compared to the rest of them. "We can go. Just don't go overboard with the rugs." He leveled a meaningful glance at Rudy. "You two should definitely have a talk about the budget."

Cam frowned sourly. "Spoilsport."

"Budget." Rudy nodded slowly. "Okay, we'll talk about that." He looked around, then turned to Bailey. "Are you heading home? We could give you a ride."

Privacy aside, Caden figured this was the perfect moment for him to step up and have a say. "I can take him home." It wasn't Cam's and Rudy's surprised looks that made him smirk; it was Bailey's shocked one. "I think we can manage a ten-minute drive without killing each other." Caden shrugged and picked up the wrappers from the ground next to his chair, all the while looking at Bailey. "And if you get really difficult, I can always gag you with dirty gym-wear and tie you with the seatbelt."

Bailey made a nauseated groan. "Repulsive, but nothing I wouldn't expect from you."

"I'm glad I manage to I meet your expectations." Seeing Bailey blush, even if it was just a little bit and so, so small it was hardly noticeable, sent chills of excitement through Caden. Who knew halfhearted flirting could get to Bailey this badly?

"It's a good thing my expectations aren't any higher," Bailey mumbled and shot a meaningful glare at Caden. Then he turned to Cam. "Call me in the morning and we'll go pottery shopping."

She looked surprised. "You're going with him?"

"You need to go home *now*, and he lives in my direction anyways. I think I can bear his company for a few minutes." He all but stuck his nose up before heading back inside. Maybe he didn't know what kind of a rush Caden got from that.

At three in the morning Bailey woke up, hands instinctively spread across the sheets and finding nothing. He frowned, barely awake, and turned over, eyes blinking open and looking for something that was missing. He smelled detergent and blackcurrant moisturizer and cut grass, and something from his dream tried to push to the front and mingle with reality and he just wouldn't let it.

"Caden?" It was a pathetic try, especially since Bailey's throat was so sore he couldn't even make a decent sound, but it felt weird that Caden would just leave because he never left until in the morning. There was no answer. Bailey sat up, listening carefully, but all he heard were distant sounds of cars and traffic.

Struggling to his feet, he pulled the sheet along and wrapped it around his flannel-covered body; pajamas were a must whether or not he was alone. Still, the layer of thin cotton gave a tiny bit more warmth, and Bailey tried to convince himself he felt better though in reality he didn't. He still felt cold and a little sick and very, very tired. He only felt a little bit better when he got to the living room and saw Caden sitting on the floor in front of the TV, every single one of Bailey's DVDs piled on the coffee table.

"I thought you left." It came out a little sharp, but Bailey really had thought Caden was gone. The man looked up, smiling lopsidedly. "Aren't you sweet to come check up on me."

"Don't flatter yourself." The couch was soft under Bailey's weight, and he nestled in the corner, watching Caden continue skimming through the DVD covers. "What are you looking for?"

"Something worth watching."

"At three in the morning?" Bailey stretched his legs along the cushions and got comfortable. "It's nothing violent, is it?"

"The most violent flicks in your collection are nature films where lions attack baby impalas." Of course Caden thought it was funny, while Bailey liked

to think educational films were much more insightful than those action movies Caden apparently liked to watch. "Nature documentaries are interesting."

Caden nodded. "So are all of those TV shows where they show liposuction or open heart surgery, but I still don't wanna watch that in the middle of the night." He put the disc in the player and stood up, casually leaving the DVDs on the table. "Move over."

Bailey barely had time to pick his feet up before Caden sat on the couch. "Aren't you going to clean those up?" he asked, gesturing towards the table.

Caden shrugged, eyes on the TV when he picked up the remote from the coffee table. "I'll do it later." He leaned back, slumping like he had every intention of taking up all the space on the couch. Bailey tried to fit comfortably in the corner, but after a while he realized it wasn't happening, so he remained uncomfortably in the corner instead. Caden fiddled with the remote and tapped the DVD cover against his denim-covered thigh, and the tapping was driving Bailey insane. "What did you pick?" He nearly yanked the cover from Caden's fingers, prepared for something even remotely adventurous or scandalous. That was not what he found. "Turtles?"

Caden glanced at him, nodding. "Yeah. Turtles are cute."

"You just said you don't want to watch nature documentaries in the middle of the night."

"No... I said I don't want to watch liposuction in the middle of the night." With a disappointed sigh Caden frowned at Bailey. "Really, you should start paying attention." Moving casually and with such effortless speed Bailey's mind couldn't keep up, Caden placed Bailey's feet on his lap, with sheets and all. "And *please* stop fidgeting. I'm trying to watch a movie." Underneath the sheet his fingers stroked absently over Bailey's ankle, like Caden wasn't thinking about what he was doing. Bailey was. He was thinking about nothing but what Caden was doing. It felt weird and nice and wrong, and Bailey felt the urge to fidget some more, but he resisted the temptation and practically froze on the cushions.

They stayed that way for a good twenty minutes; Bailey's feet in Caden's lap, Caden's fingers turning Bailey's brain into jelly, and Bailey's concentration wavering between the TV and the man sitting on the couch with him. Then awful, awful things started happening on the screen, and Bailey had to look away. Caden of course noticed this, frowning at first and then chuckling

amusedly when he realized what it was Bailey didn't want to see. "You know the baby turtle dies, right?"

"Shut up, Caden." Of course Bailey knew. "I just don't like to watch it."

"It's the way the nature works. I can't believe you're getting emotional over it."

"I am not." He had maybe shed a tear or two the first time he'd seen it and even now he felt like seeing an animal die was a little too much, but that was just because he was tired. And sick. It had nothing to do with being emotional.

"I bet you cry over every natural disaster too," Caden said teasingly.

He was good at diverting Bailey's attention from the TV, but getting irritated didn't work well with Bailey's headache. "I do not cry. But yes, I get sad. It's tragic. I suppose nothing touches your soul enough to scrape up a decent emotion."

"On the contrary." Caden waved the remote in Bailey's direction, like a lecturing teacher. "I get sad too. But it's pointless to dwell on the bad stuff when there's so much good stuff happening at the same time." Gently he tapped the remote against Bailey's knee. "You just like to see all the crappy things going on. You're a pessimist, Bailey. That attitude will give you a heart attack."

"Your company is giving me a migraine."

Caden smirked at the snarly comment until he apparently noticed Bailey's pained frown. "You're not joking, are you?"

"About your company—"

"About the migraine. Do you have anything for it?" He was already getting up, first dropping the remote on the table and then gently moving Bailey's feet from his lap. Bailey didn't like being fussed over, and he did his best to push Caden's hands off of him. "I can do it myself."

"You're pale, and you look like you're about to throw up, so could you just for once let me do something for you without an argument?" Caden's annoyed stare looked so comical Bailey bit his tongue not to laugh. He scooped up in the corner of the couch and wrapped the sheet tightly around himself.

"In the kitchen. Second shelf next to fridge."

Caden nodded theatrically. "Thank you."

A few minutes later, he returned with the medicine and a glass of water. "One pill, two pills?"

"One." It was heartwarming, being nurtured this way, though Bailey would've preferred someone else doing the nurturing. Still, he didn't complain when Caden handed him the medicine and the water, all the while watching Bailey closely as he swallowed the pill and emptied the glass.

Caden stood by the couch, looking prepared for any physical task. "Now what?" he asked, as if waiting for further instructions.

Bailey lowered the glass on the table. "It's just a migraine, not brain damage. I'm sure I'll survive."

Nodding, Caden eased back on the couch, still keeping an eye on Bailey. "Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"In your charming company? Not a chance." Bailey smiled cheekily, awarded with Caden's mocking grin seconds later.

"You keep that up, and I'll ignore your handicapped state."

Rolling his eyes, Bailey snuggled on the couch, no longer bothered if his toes poked against Caden's thigh. "Could we just watch something else?" He'd had enough of dying baby animals. His current state couldn't handle any more tragedy.

Caden stood up and got the disk from the player. "Comedy? Or how about this..." he read through the cover and grimaced. "No... that's a chick flick."

"There's another documentary..." Bailey suggested sheepishly. He ignored Caden's eye roll. "It's about chimps."

"More lost lives among nature's cutest creatures?"

"It has a happy ending. And no one dies."

Caden stared back, smiling absently. "Fine." He started going through the DVDs, mumbling to himself. "We'll watch that one." He didn't look too pleased, but by the time the movie was playing and Caden was back on the couch with Bailey's feet on his lap and his hands were gently massaging Bailey's ankles, he didn't look too bored. Or irritated. By the time Bailey relaxed and didn't lie stiff next to the man, *then* Caden looked pleased.

For the second time within a week Caden stared at that green door, only this time he had nothing but good intentions in mind. Bailey obviously didn't think so. His face went white the second he opened the door and saw who was standing on the other side. "Oh... it's you."

"Hello to you too."

"Caden, really, I am so not in the mood for this today." Bailey leaned against the door, looking like someone had wiped the floors with him. His skin was pale, his nose was red, and something weird was going on with his eyes because Caden had never seen eyes as puffy as Bailey's.

"Yeah, I can see that." Caden made a small "tsk"-sound and shook his head. "You look like shit."

"Thank you," Bailey said sourly. "So, please, just go away. I'm not in any condition to entertain you tonight."

"What's with you and misunderstanding things?" Caden shook his head disappointedly. "I came to rescue you from your awful state." He held up the paper bag he'd brought along.

Bailey furrowed his brow. "You cannot bribe me."

Caden whisked up his most irresistible smile. "I'd like to remind you that I don't need to bribe you to get what I want. If I remember correctly, you're quite capable of giving it willingly." With a more reconciling tone he continued. "Seriously though... I got you ginger tea and oranges."

The frown on Bailey's face smoothed a little. He glanced at the bag, teeth chewing on his bottom lip. "Ginger tea?"

"Ginger and honey, actually. You like that one, right?" Caden passed the bag to Bailey who took it without arguments.

Bailey peeked in the bag. "Who's the popcorn for?"

"Me. I don't like oranges."

Bailey looked at Caden, soon shaking his head before he stepped back. "Fine. But if you start groping me I'll kick you out." Before he left the foyer he glanced over his shoulder. "Shoes and jacket by the rack. You're dripping wet." Then he sailed off, from the sounds of it attacking the first of the seven oranges Caden had bought him.

Caden kicked his shoes off and tossed his jacket over the rack—it probably landed on the floor—before following Bailey. He frowned at the vacuum

cleaner left in the corner of the living room. "You're not gonna start cleaning, are you?"

Bailey was in the kitchen, the paper bag emptied and now neatly folded on the table while he busied himself with a small kettle. "I already started. I'll finish up later." He sniffed a few times, then grabbed a paper towel from an ambitious pile stacked on the table and blew his nose. Caden watched Bailey toss the paper away, wash his hands by the sink, and then continue preparing the tea, all the while sniffing and sneezing like something was buzzing in his nostrils.

"Okay... how about you go sit down."

Bailey shooed Caden away when he tried to take the kettle. "I can make myself tea."

"No doubt you can do a whole lot of things, but you really look like shit, and since you're dumb enough to clean this place when you're sick, how about I make you tea before you pass out on the stove." Caden took the kettle from Bailey and pushed the man out of the kitchen. Bailey didn't like this. In fact, Bailey looked like he might cough slime all over Caden.

"Do not boss me around in my own kitchen."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Caden handed the oranges to Bailey. "I'm only helping."

Bailey took the fruits but remained by the door, looking suspicious. "You don't *help*. You invade and bully and order people around." Then he frowned, looking around worryingly while taking a small step back. "How'd you know I was sick, anyways?"

"Cam told me." That was true. Hopefully Caden hadn't let out any carefully hidden secrets while fishing out the reason for Bailey's absence. Caden glanced over his shoulder and saw Bailey looking really worried. "She seemed convinced I was only interested in where you were because now I had no one to bug."

Bailey's brow arched. "Told you." *Sniff-sniff-sniff*. "We see right through you," Bailey said victoriously, waving his hand in front of Caden. Then he coughed quietly, very Bailey-like and stepped further back. "Just don't break anything."

Caden snorted dismissively. "I think I know how to use your stove."

Five minutes later, the stove was the least of Caden's problems. It was the microwave oven he didn't know how to use. It had like a thousand buttons, and he was sure if he pressed the wrong one, his popcorn would turn into ash. He didn't even think about asking Bailey for help, because that was like asking for help while changing tires; not something Caden did.

"Everything okay in there?" Bailey asked from the living room.

"Yeah." Caden shoved the popcorn package in the microwave and picked a button at random. Hopefully it wouldn't lead to an explosion. "Do you want sugar in your tea?"

"Yes, please. Three-quarters of a teaspoon."

Caden shook his head while searching for the sugar. "Three-quarters..." He only found a bag of sugar in the cupboard and if Bailey expected him to use some fancy measuring thing to add exactly three-quarters of a teaspoon, too bad. Caden added some, perhaps too much, and stirred the sugar in the tea while waiting for his popcorn to finish. Amazingly they didn't turn into ash, but it took another few minutes to find salt in Bailey's perfectly organized kitchen. Everything was spotless and clean and shiny, even the double-sink. Caden's flat never looked like this, not even on a good day and especially not when he was sick. When he was sick, his apartment looked like a disaster zone.

When he got to the living room, Bailey was curled up in the corner of the pale gray sectional parked in the middle of the living room. He'd placed a few paper towels in his lap, orange skins neatly layered on top of them. He smiled briefly when Caden handed him the tea. "Thank you." He took a cautious sip, maybe to eliminate any burns or to smell any added poisons before he'd digest any. Apparently it wasn't too sweet because he didn't spit it out. There were no high praises either, but Caden considered a civilized "thank you" as a sign of approval.

Caden sat on the other end of the couch and tossed his hoodie aside. He had chucked the popcorn into the first plastic bowl he'd located in the kitchen, and now that he plopped the bowl on his lap, Bailey shot him a firm glare. "Don't crumble those all over my couch."

"And here I was thinking I'd just flip them on your cushions."

"And please don't leave any greasy prints on the upholstery. I can't even begin to explain how difficult it would be to clean."

Caden leaned back against the corner of the couch, watching Bailey chew down a piece of orange. "I am housetrained, you know."

Bailey smiled crookedly. "If you say so." He sank deeper against the couch, a green quilt spread over his bent legs and the enormous black-and-white striped sweater pooling around him while he continued munching down his oranges. He looked completely off, not at all like himself, but then again Caden wasn't an expert on how people usually looked when they got sick. The last time he'd even had a flu was years ago, and he usually tended to avoid anyone who was sick. Why this time was different, Caden wasn't sure. He didn't care enough to actually ponder on it.

"Why are you here, anyways?" Bailey asked after they'd stared at some sitcom running on TV for a few minutes. Caden shrugged, crunching a mouthful of popcorn. Bailey turned, now facing Caden with his back leaned against the corner of the couch. "Why are you being so *nice*?"

"I can't be nice?"

"It's suspicious. And very strange."

"Oh, come on." Another mouthful, then chewing. "I'm considerate and caring. It's normal for people to worry over the well-being of their fellow citizen."

Bailey stared back blankly. "Last year when I had that nasty sinusitis you kept making elephant noises every time I sneezed."

"Oh yeah..." Caden nodded. "I did do that."

"Yes. That's how considerate you are." Bailey sank even deeper into the cushions until he almost lay on his side on the couch. "Whatever the agenda is here, can you not attack me while I'm defenseless?"

"Now would I ever attack you?" Caden asked but soon nodded when Bailey just stared back. "Okay, I promise not to take advantage of your defenseless state."

Apparently satisfied with the response, Bailey sighed and turned on his side. "Thank you." He put the leftover oranges and skins and towels on the coffee table and fussed for a while, his woolen sock-covered feet poking against Caden's thigh, before he settled under the quilt, head resting against the pillow tucked in the corner of the couch. Then he fell still, so still Caden had to watch really carefully to make sure Bailey hadn't passed out immediately.

“You shouldn’t clean around the flat when you’re sick,” he said after a while.

Bailey’s heavy breath sounded funny through the quilt. “No one else’s is gonna do it for me.”

“You can do it when you’re *not* sick. When you’re sick, you’re supposed to rest and avoid any physical stress.”

“Dust irritates my sinuses.”

“No one gives a shit about your sinuses when you die of myocarditis.”

Bailey snorted amusedly. “Listen to you, doctor.”

“Make fun all you like, Bailey. I’ll be sure to remind you of this when you lie in a hospital bed with tubes and catheters attached to your body.” Caden continued emptying his bowl, nothing but the TV keeping him company while Bailey remained quiet.

After a moment the man sighed deeply and pushed the edge of his quilt lower. “I’m not *that* sick. It’s just a common cold.”

Caden shrugged, never taking his eyes off the TV. “I’m sure that’s what all the twenty-something-year-old men and women said before they got rushed to the hospital for—”

“Alright!” Bailey snapped, glaring at Caden maliciously. “I won’t clean when I’m sick. Happy now?”

Caden nodded, smiling pleasantly. “Very.”

Bailey sighed huffily and stretched his long legs so that the next kick against Caden’s thigh was definitely premeditated. Caden didn’t say a word about it, though. He figured being sick was not Bailey’s favorite thing in the world and therefore he had a right to be pissed off. Not that he was the life of the party on any other day.

Caden stared at the TV, completely oblivious to any of the actors or even the name of the show he was watching. The longer he watched it, the less sense it made, and after three commercial breaks he was ready to watch something else. He looked at Bailey, prepared to ask if they could possibly change the channel, but it seemed the tea or the added vitamins from the oranges or just overall exhaustion had won over. Bailey probably wouldn’t care if Caden switched the channel, because Bailey was asleep.

This was a whole new problem for Caden. Though they'd had sex many, *many* times by now and even shared a bed while sleeping, Caden had never actually seen Bailey sleep. It shouldn't have been such a big deal, but for whatever reason it was. Technically Caden no longer had a reason to stick around, since his host was floating in whole other levels of consciousness, but at the same time Caden felt it would be rude to just up and go. And that thought led him into thinking, since when did he care about whether or not something was rude.

Frowning and still watching Bailey, Caden tossed a few kernels in his mouth. His mind was racing with all sorts of pranks he could pull on Bailey now that the guy was oblivious to things around him. But no, that would be very immature. And impolite. And somehow it felt pointless, because no matter how in favor of practical jokes Caden was, a sleeping Bailey didn't rouse such desire for pranking as an awake version of the man did. Sleeping Bailey was actually kind of... cute. In a very illogical, contradictory kind of way.

Bailey didn't snore. Neither did he drool on his pillow or make obnoxious faces like some people did in their sleep. He just looked all Bailey. A little less snappy and demanding and difficult Bailey. Actually, the more Caden thought about it, this Bailey might even win over naked Bailey. Then Caden reached a certain point of thinking about it and decided that nothing won over naked Bailey.

Still, the man, like he was now, was pretty easy on the eyes. Not that there was typically anything wrong with the way he looked, but at least now Caden could look without being told he was staring or that the way he looked at Bailey was weird and suspicious and he should definitely stop. So Caden didn't stop looking. He forgot about the TV and the sitcom, and the popcorn was tasteless in his mouth as he became completely transfixed by details, like how light Bailey's eyelashes were or how pale freckles were visible now that he was still and Caden could look without disturbance. Bailey's hair was frizzy, and the puffiness of his eyes was even more noticeable now that they were closed. And he still looked good. Caden had always noticed the good looks, but before, mentioning it would've resulted in insults and bickering so he'd skipped the compliments and kept their conversations strictly argumentative. It had proven to be entertaining, at times even thought-provoking like they'd now realized. Still, Caden was a prankster at heart, and regardless of his earlier promises, he couldn't quite bypass an opportunity such as this.

He picked popcorn from the bowl, evaluating his chances of living through this before he tossed the kernel through the air. It landed on the top of Bailey's

head, like a tiny crown over strawberry blond hair. Caden threw another, this time aiming a little lower. The popcorn bounced off of Bailey's cheek and rolled onto the floor. Caden made a mental note to pick it up before he left.

After decorating Bailey's hair with a few snacks and completely polluting the floor in front of the couch, Caden finally managed to aim correctly and the last popcorn in the bowl hit Bailey on the nose. "Score!" Caden cheered in a whisper, arms raised above his head in a victorious gesture. Bailey sniffed quietly and curled deeper inside the quilt, his nose wrinkled before he coughed in his sleep.

Caden refused to feel guilty. He did, however, make himself useful before he left.

Bailey jerked from his sleep, unconscious one moment and hyperaware the next. His throat felt swollen and thick, making swallowing the second most painful thing to do. The most painful thing to do was moving. Bailey's body didn't like it. His brain, on the other hand, didn't like not seeing Caden, because Bailey had no idea how long he'd been sleeping and for all he knew Caden could be lurking behind the curtains or something and scare him to death.

A quick investigation proved that Caden had left. Bailey didn't know how he felt about it; it was nice of the man to bring him tea, but at the same time Bailey liked his privacy and Caden just randomly stopping by messed with Bailey's plans. And Bailey did love his plans.

Bailey was even more confused when he found the dishes in the dishwasher and what was left of the oranges neatly in the trash bin. It was oddly heart-warming that Caden had cleaned up after them; he probably knew Bailey would do it himself. Somehow it was so sweet Bailey couldn't stop smiling. Then later that day Cam stopped by, and Bailey remembered why he sometimes hated Caden's sense of humor.

Cam looked at him weird when she stepped inside. She brought up her hand and yanked something off of Bailey's hair. "Is this popcorn?"

Yeah... Bailey didn't like that.

Caden wasn't as immune as he'd thought. By Monday afternoon he felt like he'd swallowed sandpaper. He felt almost shitty enough to go and buy that

ginger tea for himself, but he still held on to his two pots of coffee per day and hoped all the caffeine he rinsed his insides with would eliminate the germs.

He met Rudy after getting off from work, though he'd briefly thought about canceling due to his sudden spring cold. However, since he'd promised he'd help Rudy pick up the slate tiles for the backyard, Caden's conscience wouldn't let him slide.

By the time Caden got to the store, Rudy had already dealt with the paperwork and was waiting by the loading zone to get his order. "Sorry I'm late." Caden stopped by the pickup and leaned against the truck, his headache reminding him of its existence.

"That's cool. There was some mix-up and they're making calls." Rudy checked his watch, cursing under his breath. "I thought we'd get started with this today, but if they have to call the main office and everything, this is going to take longer than I planned."

"Well, I'm not in a hurry, so..." Truthfully Caden was glad; maybe he wouldn't have to carry anything heavier than a pillow.

To avoid thinking about his shitty state, he started up conversation about the house and the never-ending list of things still left to do. Apparently Cam now allowed Rudy to take care of the yard while she was happy finishing with the walls and décor. Caden listened to Rudy explain the layout for the slates and the approximate time it would take to have the backyard finished, but most of what the man said went in one ear and out the other. Eventually his distracted mind was noticed by his company.

"Are you okay?" Rudy asked and lifted his sunglasses from his face. Caden nodded. "Yeah, I think I just caught a cold or something. I've been feeling like crap all day."

"You should've called. I could've asked Jeff to come along."

"No, it's cool. Fresh air heals everything."

Five hours later Caden nearly crawled inside his apartment, nothing but sleep on his mind. He was tempted to call Bailey and demand immediate attention since it was Bailey's fault that Caden was sick. If it wasn't for Bailey's stupid flannel pajamas and pathetic condition, Caden could've resisted staying for as long as he had. That, of course, was a lie, because it was the chance to be in Bailey's presence that made it so hard for Caden to resist the temptation. Still, Caden would've liked to be in prime condition instead of

feeling like someone had scooped out half of his muscles and left him to suffer a slow death.

By Tuesday afternoon his boss told him to take the rest of the week off. Caden thought this was a little excessive since he'd probably be on his feet by Thursday. Still, permission to lounge around resulted in undisturbed sleep and one whole day of nothing but lying on his back on the couch and watching movies which didn't require any active thinking. It also resulted in him totally ignoring laundry and cooking and making sure he'd have food in his fridge. Luckily he managed to feed Kitty—she would claw his eyes out if she didn't get food—and clean the litter box. Other than that, Caden remained immobile. That was until his phone rang early Wednesday evening and a few little letters flashing on the screen managed to brighten up his spirit tremendously.

"I hope you're calling to beg for forgiveness," he rasped without bothering with any "hello, how are you".

"I wouldn't go that far." Bailey sounded very reasonable, but then again he always did. "But yes, I heard you got sick, and I kinda feel bad because you probably got it from me." The man spoke very quietly, which told Caden that Bailey's location wasn't the most suitable. "Are you at Cam's?"

"Yeah. Rudy said you weren't feeling well when he saw you on Monday."

"That was nothing. Since then I've started coughing up blood and phlegm." That wasn't true and Caden felt good about his little white lie right until the point where Bailey started talking again, sounding alarmed. "Please tell me you're joking?"

"I am."

"Asshole."

"Oh... he cusses. I'm shocked."

Bailey sighed heavily. "Clearly it was a mistake to call you. Have fun choking on your mucus."

Caden chuckled, feeling revived. "Oh don't be like that. I'm crippled by whatever virus is rampaging through my system. Let me have some fun."

"Why does it always have to be at my expense?"

"Because it makes it twice as good." Really it was because no one else would strike back as hard and quick as Bailey, but there was no reason to say that out loud. Instead Caden searched for his charms, the ones that didn't work too well when he was sick. "Do you wanna make me feel better?"

“Does it include nudity or audacious suggestions?”

“Sadly, no.”

“Then what?”

It would've been nice if Bailey sounded even slightly excited instead of bored. But Caden wasn't picky. He'd take what he could get. “I wouldn't mind some company.” Did that break the terms of their agreement? Probably not, though Bailey had a way of twisting everything around so that anything could seem wrong and screwed up at the end. Now the man stayed quiet for a while, and Caden found himself eager to hear the response.

“I guess I could come over.” Muffled speech invaded the quietness on the line, and Caden heard Bailey say something to someone standing nearby. Then the background went quiet. “I've still got some things I promised to help Cam with, and then I have to stop by at home. So... couple of hours?”

“It's not like I'm going anywhere.”

“Yeah... I guess you're not.” Though Bailey sounded apprehensive, Caden's mood was skyrocketing towards giddy. Maybe he had a fever. Or maybe he was just glad he could use his late spring cold as an excuse to lure Bailey into his personal space.

It was nearly seven o'clock by the time Bailey got to Caden's apartment. After leaving home, Bailey had stopped by the grocery store to get some tea—he doubted Caden had any—and milk—Caden probably didn't have that either. He also bought a specific type of ice cream and cookies. He didn't want to think about how exactly he knew which ice cream and cookies Caden liked, and he especially didn't want to think about why he cared enough for the man's current condition to actually go through the trouble of buying him some. Now he felt like an idiot for buying anything at all. He felt like he'd somehow invited himself over though he really hadn't done that. Caden being sick should be the perfect reason for Bailey to stay away, and yet here he was, waiting outside the door for Caden to appear and let him in. Appear looking like a wet dream, to be precise.

Bailey stared at the man standing by the opened door, dressed in old, ragged sweats and a T-shirt which looked wrinkled and old. “How come when you're sick you look like that, and when I'm sick I look like death warmed over?”

Caden shrugged very slightly, looking like he'd just climbed out of bed. "What can I say... some people are just born with it." The grin on his face was lazy and drowsy and just the right thing to plant all sorts of ideas in Bailey's head. To avoid getting completely lost in those ideas, Bailey thrust the bag at Caden. "Compensation. Cookies and ice cream." He sneaked inside carefully, so that he wouldn't end up rubbing himself up against Caden, who closed the door. "Aren't you sweet?" That drowsy smirk turned into a genuine smile when he saw what was in it. Needless to say Bailey didn't need to see that smile. That smile went straight to his head.

"Yes, well..." He was *not* stuttering, though he had to look away to get his thoughts back in order. "I brought tea too."

Caden grimaced and left the foyer. "I'm not a tea-person."

Bailey followed soon after. "It'll make you feel better, I promise." Bailey's optimistic spirit suffered a minor setback when he reached the living room. He couldn't walk any further, let alone continue speaking.

Caden looked over from the couch, then glanced around when he saw Bailey's frozen stance. "It's like my survival kit."

Bailey stepped up to the small square table placed between the couch and a matching armchair and picked up a crumbled hamburger wrapping which had leaked something green and spotty on the table. "This is your survival kit?"

"Fast food works wonders when you're sick."

"I'm not talking about the food." Bailey gathered used tissues from the table. "I'm talking about the missing biohazard tags you should've put on your front door."

"I don't think there're any dangerous germs living here," Caden shrugged and slumped on the couch.

Bailey looked around, physically hurting at the sight of disorder. He paused by the couch, trying to remain calm and composed. "How about I make you tea?" He held up the bag. "Would you like ice cream or cookies?"

Caden glanced at the bag. "Cookies. Ice cream for dessert." Then he wiggled his brows, and it was so lame Bailey had to bite his cheek not to laugh out loud. To prevent any such atypical behavior, he escaped the living room and managed to swallow his moan when he saw the mess in the kitchen.

It wasn't filthy. It wasn't even dirty. There was no food on the floors or stains on doors or walls. It was just so messy and disorganized, Bailey couldn't

understand how anyone could navigate through such chaos. It took him a few minutes to clear enough space to get the tea started and even longer to find a cupboard with bowls and plates. Still, he didn't say anything about it when he took a plate of cookies into the living room, accompanied by a glass of milk. Caden frowned at the glass. "I didn't know I had milk."

"You didn't." Bailey lowered his offerings to the table in front of the couch. "I brought it with me. Just in case I happen to drink coffee here."

Caden nodded, a weird, lazy look on his face. "Morning coffee?"

"What? No. Not morning coffee. Just... coffee." Bailey stepped back from the table. "I'm not going to stay over."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. You said no nudity or audacious suggestions."

Caden sighed and picked up the plate from the table. "Yeah, guess I did." He munched the first cookie, and Bailey almost told him to watch for those crumbs until he realized it wasn't his couch. Caden could sprinkle the cookies all over the furniture if he wanted.

"So what's this all about? Are you feeling guilty?" Caden asked.

Bailey shook his head and headed back towards the kitchen. "No. I'm just returning a favor." He heard Caden chuckle but didn't turn around to see if the man was laughing at him or at something Bailey had said. The man sounded kindly amused when he spoke. "In that case I should probably tell you I gave you a handjob when you were sleeping."

Two months ago Bailey would've been outraged. Now he just smiled. "I'm pretty sure I would've woken up if you'd done that." Caden's answer was another throaty chuckle, and Bailey realized the smile lingered on his face all through tea preparations. While he searched for a mug, and a spoon and sugar in case Caden wanted some added with the honey, Bailey cleared the tabletops without even really thinking about it. It took no more than a few minutes, and the kitchen looked a lot better, though it still had Caden written all over it.

"Tell me if it needs sugar," Bailey said once he took the tea to the living room. Caden sat up and took the mug, sniffing it suspiciously. "What is it?"

"It's the same brand you got me. I just put in a little bit more honey." Bailey started gathering wrinkled tissues and wrappers from the table, picking up two empty soda cans and an empty bag of tortilla chips. He cleared the space

around them while Caden silently sipped his tea. Apparently it didn't need any sugar. After a while he noticed Caden watching him intently. Bailey stood up, suddenly feeling foolish. "I thought I'd just clear away all this stuff."

"Right..." Caden put his feet on the coffee table, again something Bailey wanted to comment on, but he just sighed deeply and reminded himself that this was not his home. Caden cocked his brow while watching Bailey. "So I've got my very own maid now?"

"Don't push it," Bailey muttered and took the trash into the kitchen. The trash bin was full by the time he was done, but Bailey refused to feel obligated to take the trash out. Instead he went back into the living room, prepared to sit on the armchair, but Caden grabbed a hold of his hand, nearly tripping Bailey on the floor. "What...?"

"Come here." Caden pulled Bailey onto the couch, apparently not to grope or harass him, but before Bailey managed to bounce back up and retreat to the chair, Caden had placed his mug on the coffee table and fell on the couch with his head in Bailey's lap. "Now this is good."

Bailey, who hadn't expected this and wasn't sure if he appreciated such closeness all of a sudden, sat frozen and stared down at Caden who seemed very pleased with himself. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sick."

"Well, obviously."

"I'm in need of tender, loving care." Caden twisted his face into a pitiful frown, probably aiming for puppy-eyes.

Luckily Bailey was immune to looks like that. "You're in need of intensive therapy. Really, Caden, get off of me."

"You can't really be that cruel." Instead of following simple instructions, Caden stretched and turned on his side, looking *very* pleased with himself. Too bad he also got *very* close to Bailey while moving around.

"Caden?"

"Mmm..."

"Get your face off my crotch."

It seemed like it was too hard to complete, but eventually Caden turned around, sighing laboriously. "Always with the complaining... jeez..." He looked up at Bailey. "Can't a man rest for a second?"

“I never told you that you couldn’t rest, but don’t expect me to be your mattress.”

“Just the pillow, Bailey.” Caden flashed that smile again, a shallow dimple forming on his right cheek, and dark thick brows arching, so that for a second he looked almost... tender. “You make a great pillow.”

Bailey wanted to say he didn’t care, but instead he just sat there, staring down at Caden who looked back with those dark brown eyes of his. Their agreement did not cover this. There was no clause that said they were to feel obligated to check in on each other, in case one or both of them got sick. Bailey hadn’t felt obligated. He’d just felt bad. And sort of responsible. And for some reason, when he’d thought of Caden being stuck at home alone with nothing but tissues to give him comfort, Bailey had *wanted* to come by. To be there. To see if maybe there was something he could help with. He hadn’t planned this, and he definitely wouldn’t have volunteered to act as a pillow, but now he couldn’t say no. Not when Caden kept looking at him like that; like the man was just waiting for him to shove his host to the floor.

Bailey went back to the rules but still couldn’t convince himself to get up and leave. This felt too nice to be tossed aside. The weight on his lap, the weight against him. Having someone next to him, when it had been a while since he’d really had anyone with him. Even when Bailey and Liam had still been together, it had often been days and days without feeling close to someone. Now there was Caden—Caden who was a jerk and insolent and rude and half the time made Bailey so mad he wanted to break something.

Did rebound sex cover momentary streaks of affection? Bailey didn’t know. He’d never had a rebound kind of thing before, so the rules were a little hazy, but he had a feeling this wasn’t what they’d originally planned.

Still trying to keep things from getting totally out of hand, Bailey reorganized his thoughts and returned to matters he felt needed to be dealt with. “Cam came by later.”

Caden frowned, like he’d been thinking about other things too. “Huh?”

“After you left.” When this information didn’t seem to spark any worries, he continued matter-of-factly. “She could’ve showed up while you were there.”

“But she didn’t.”

“She could’ve.”

“But she did not.”

Caden didn't seem one bit worried. In fact, he looked even more relaxed than he'd been before. Bailey couldn't understand this. “I think we should be more careful.”

“I don't think we could be any more careful, even if we tried.” Caden smirked lopsidedly, again managing to throw Bailey off. “Stop worrying all the time, Bailey. Just have fun for a change.”

Didn't he understand how absurd that sounded? Have fun for a change? Bailey wasn't completely foreign to the concept of fun, but he would never sacrifice his personal dignity and pride just to have a few hours of physical fun. If people found out, if they really knew what Bailey allowed Caden to do to him, they would never look at him the same way. He didn't want to become one of those guys he'd always looked at with pity, thinking how they'd just burn their fingers while playing with Caden.

Bailey blinked when a sudden touch on his cheek snapped him out of his distressing thoughts. Caden had brought his hand up, his fingers barely caressing Bailey's cheek, before the touch was already gone. “Really. Stop worrying.” Then Caden turned fully over on his back, legs stretched over the armrest of the couch, and head turned to the side. He watched TV, while Bailey watched him, feeling misplaced. His cheek tingled, where Caden had touched him, a ghostly sensation of a burn still left on his skin.

Slowly Bailey relaxed, even watched TV for a few moments, but whatever movie Caden had picked, it wasn't something Bailey would've chosen, so Bailey's eyes trailed across the room instead. He was a little pedantic when it came to order, but Caden wasn't a slob. His home was always clean, if only a little disorganized. There was cat hair everywhere, but that probably couldn't be avoided. For now, the creature named Kitty remained unseen, so Bailey didn't need to worry about getting rubbed up against by that furred monster.

Eventually he trained his eyes back on Caden, who seemed content resting his head on Bailey's lap. “Did the tea help?” Bailey asked just to fill the silence.

“Yeah. Still tastes like crap, though.” Caden didn't move, didn't take his eyes off of the screen. He sounded a little groggy, his voice raspy in a way which told Bailey that Caden's throat had to be pretty sore.

“I could make some more if you want.”

“Maybe later?” Caden glanced at Bailey quickly, then looked away when Bailey nodded. Maybe later.

Seconds ticked by, minutes which felt impossibly long. It was uncomfortable to be that comfortable in silence, like it was okay to not say a word and just sit there and watch TV, though Bailey wasn't even watching it. He just stared at the screen without seeing a thing, subconsciously noticing things around him. Things, like how the spider plants in front of the window seemed to radiate electric green when the reddening sunrays peeked inside, or how the ashtray on the small round table beneath the window was empty, and how there wasn't even a whiff of cigarette in the air. All he smelled was the last of the tea and something like furniture polish, and the scent he recognized, floating up towards him. Minty and crisp, probably shampoo. Bailey looked down and realized he'd moved, though he hadn't noticed doing so. His left hand was brought up, fingers alternating between combing through Caden's short, dark hair and sweeping over his stubbly cheek. It took a few seconds for Bailey to realize what he was doing, even longer for him to stop. He pulled his hand away, confused and perhaps a little alarmed. Since when had he been so bold?

“Why'd you stop?” Caden asked but didn't move to look up. After a moment he tucked his shoulder against Bailey's thigh. “Come on... it felt nice.” He said it so casually, like it was nothing at all. He said it like it was the most natural thing in the world for them to lounge on the couch like this, for him to rest his head in Bailey's lap, and for Bailey to touch him so tenderly. Bailey was sure it wasn't that casual. He was sure it wasn't nothing at all and definitely not the most natural thing in the world, but still he lowered his hand, unable to come up with any reason why he shouldn't. His touch was hesitant at first, like he was testing whether it felt as nice as he remembered, but soon he found the rhythm, the tips of his fingers brushing gently over Caden's scalp before sliding to his cheek.

Bailey could easily see how this was comforting for Caden. He just didn't understand why it was so comforting for him.

Within the next week and a half, Caden remembered why exactly he sometimes wished he was a hermit. His once-in-a-decade spring cold had faded largely thanks to that nasty tea for sure, and after returning to work, and continuing being a friend to those who seemed too lazy to build their own

backyard porch, Caden was thankful when Rudy informed him that the upcoming weekend was renovation-free. No offense to the couple, but Caden felt like he'd spent all of his spare time checking measurements or attaching nails to wood. He liked physical work, but enough was enough. That was why a lazy day at the beach fit into Caden's schedule more than perfectly; nothing but sun, sand, and half-naked people.

"I do love summer." Caden leaned back on his towel, bathing in the sun while watching men and women of all ages stroll around the beach. A poorly hidden snort a few feet behind him brought a smile to his face. He glanced over his shoulder at Bailey who was sitting on a blanket under one of the few trees growing by the shoreline. "What was that?"

Bailey shrugged. "Nothing." He sat cross-legged in the shade with a book in his lap, a cap on his head, and sunglasses on his nose, with too much clothing for the heavenly weather they were granted. "That was just very predictable." He flipped a page, smirking sourly at Caden. "You'd love winter too if people didn't wear so many clothes."

Staring back for a few seconds, Caden turned sideways to Bailey. "A human body is a beautiful creation. What's not to love?"

Again Bailey shrugged, but this time he didn't answer. He remained silent in that stone-like position, the book cradled in his lap. Unlike others present, Bailey was covered from head to toe. His pants were loose and sort of floaty, but they still reached his ankles, and the shirt he had on, however light and summery, still had sleeves long enough to cover Bailey's arms down to his wrists.

Glancing around, Caden noticed Ethan and Rudy by the volleyball net. Apparently they were discussing rules for the upcoming game with a few people, Caden didn't know. Chances were, the game would end disastrously; Ethan was a really poor loser. Too bad he also sucked at any type of team sports. It was fun to watch, though. Cam sat on a bench nearby, playing with her phone. Jenny and Jeff were still queuing by the ice cream cart, from the looks of it, having trouble deciding what to buy. For a second Caden was tempted to join them, having a sweet tooth of his own, but then he looked at the miles-long queue and decided it wasn't worth the trouble.

He glanced over his shoulder at Bailey who seemed completely focused on his book. "Hey."

Bailey looked up, the shades hiding his eyes from Caden. "What?"

“Come sit here with me.”

Bailey lowered his glasses, frowning, before he pushed the shades back in place and looked down at his book. “No.”

“What do you mean ‘no’?”

“I mean, no, I will not come sit there with you.” He waved off a tiny fly, face twisted with irritation. You would think he didn’t like to be outdoors. No... he really *didn’t* like to be outdoors.

Caden watched Bailey’s soundless fretting for a moment, then stood up and grabbed his beach towel. Bailey looked up when he slumped on the blanket next to the man. “What are you doing?”

“Keeping you company.”

Bailey took his glasses off, squinting at Caden. “I have a book to keep me company, so feel free to run off.”

“Now would a friend do that?” Gently Caden tapped the tip of Bailey’s nose, causing the man to jerk back. His hand was slapped away.

“Keep your hands off of my face.”

“Would you like them better on your ass?”

Wide-eyed, Bailey stared back, first going white before his whole face obtained a pretty shade of pink. He shoved the glasses back on his nose and scooted all the way to the other edge of the blanket. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t just hear that.”

Caden leaned back on his arms. “I can say it louder if it’ll help.”

“Shut up, Caden.” Bailey peered around. “Someone might hear you.”

“In this cacophony? I doubt it.”

Bailey huffed indignantly, shaking his head. “There is no reason to be crude.” He turned a page and held his posture perfectly while focusing on his book. Caden watched him for a while before glancing around. There were dozens of half-naked people walking around, and still his eyes soon drifted back to Bailey. Bailey, who was dressed just as modestly as he always was, and still he managed to captivate Caden’s attention. Maybe it was the knowledge of what hid under that modest front that made Caden so sensitive to even the smallest things in Bailey’s repertoire. There was something sensual and undeniably sexy hidden beneath that righteous exterior. Caden had a feeling not too many people had seen that side of Bailey.

Caden sat up straight and tugged on the leg of Bailey's white pants. "Why do you wear these?"

Bailey looked up, frowning. "What? Clothes?" he asked. "Because I'm pretty sure there's a law that states nudity in a public place is punishable."

"On the beach, Bailey," Caden spoke slowly, like he was talking to an idiot. "We're on the beach, and you sit in the shadow, covered from head to toe. Why?" He smiled teasingly, leaning a little closer. "Don't tell me you're feeling shy? Because I can assure you, there is absolutely no reason for that."

Bailey frowned and brushed the side of his cap, as if to make sure it was still in place. "I get sunburns."

"Ever heard of sunblock?"

"Ever heard of thirteen hours at the ER for second-degree burns after a day at the beach, regardless of sunblock?"

Caden's smile drifted off. "You got burned that badly?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

"When I was sixteen." Sighing heavily, Bailey closed the book and pulled off his shades. "I do use sunblock, SPF fifty. If I went around wearing nothing but trunks and got in the water, I'd look like a cooked crab by the end of the day. You get a flawless tan, I get blisters. And a sunstroke. Plus I'm allergic to horseflies, so that's another reason why I try to stay away from the water. Anaphylactic shock on top of sunburns is not my idea of a fun day at the beach."

"Anaphylactic shock? Have you ever had one of those?"

"No. But I don't want to risk it just to find out whether or not I'd get one." Bailey squinted and looked around, the sun apparently working its magic regardless of the sunblock.

"You still get freckles." Caden gestured at Bailey, once the man looked at him. "There's like twice as many now compared to how many there were in the morning." His hand moved on its own volition, fingers sliding over Bailey's cheek. He imagined he could feel every freckle on warm, heated smoothness, like spots of tiny mocha paleness sprinkled over Bailey's skin.

Bailey looked confused for a few seconds, before he pulled away. "Don't do that." He put the sunglasses back in place. "We're in public."

Caden looked around, a little confused himself. No one seemed to have noticed, but his own behavior was slightly shocking. Pick-up lines could always be blamed on stupid jokes and being irritating for the sake of being irritating, but touching where touching wasn't necessary would cause nothing but trouble. Still, Caden was itching to touch some more. Ever since they'd stayed up all night and watched stupid nature documentaries, and Caden got sick, his motives had changed. Drastically. He still liked the annoyed version of Bailey, because there were only a few things better than bickering with Bailey, but seeing the man humming with contentment after a little caretaking was a whole new thing for Caden. Maybe Bailey was fastidious, but he wasn't immune to gentle wooing. Or whatever the hell it was called.

Underneath the cap, Bailey's brows drew into a frown. "You're staring at me."

"Am I?"

"Yes. Please stop." Bailey turned the page, sighing deeply, before he leaned over the book again. And Caden still wouldn't stop staring. He didn't want to, so why should he?

"Will you go home with me tonight?" he asked after a moment. No teases, no provocation thrown back and forth. Just a simple question. He didn't even think about what they might or might not do later that day; he just wanted Bailey to go home with him. "Maybe stay the night?"

Bailey was still seemingly preoccupied with his book, but Caden recognized the way he kept chewing his bottom lip; it was something Bailey did to distract himself from distracting things. Going with his instinct, Caden pushed the topic a little. "I've got oranges."

Bailey's lips twitched, but he remained almost stoic. It was the twitch Caden went with.

"I've still got that tea, too." He nudged his shoulder against Bailey's, smiling when Bailey's lips quirked upwards. The man was so easy sometimes.

It was like déjà vu minus the snoring.

Bailey woke up with a sore back and something which felt an awful lot like a pre-stage of a headache, not in his own bed but in Caden's. This time he was the one on his back, but Caden was right next to him, arm flung across Bailey's

waist, and stubbly chin pressed against the crook of Bailey's neck. Bailey ignored the way his own hand was curled over Caden's arm, and he especially ignored the way his lips wanted to smile the second he recognized the scent of Caden's shampoo.

Stupid, stupid instincts.

Sliding out of bed wasn't as easy as Bailey remembered it being. He didn't accomplish it nearly as gracefully, and again he was in danger of falling to the floor. He managed to get out silently, though, and as he started to gather his clothes, Caden was still asleep. By the time Bailey had pulled on his boxers and searched blindly for his shirt, Caden started moving. First slowly, lazily, before he seemed to realize the space next to him was empty. Even in the poor lighting Bailey saw the frown on Caden's face as the man rolled onto his back and lifted his head, eyes barely open and probably seeing very little. "Bailey?"

"I didn't mean to wake you." Bailey pulled on the shirt, uncomfortable being caught like this. "Just go back to sleep. I have to get home."

"What time is it?" Caden rubbed a hand across his face and propped himself up on his elbows. "It's Saturday. Come back to bed." He held out his hand, probably expecting Bailey to take it, but when Bailey continued looking for his clothes, Caden's hand fell to the bed. "Bailey?"

"Yeah?"

"That's my shirt." Caden pointed at Bailey, who glanced down on himself and recognized Caden's gray-printed tee. He should've known, he figured. It was too long and too soft and too everything, and now Bailey felt even more awkward, standing in the middle of the bedroom with nothing but a shirt and boxers on, and Caden was going to watch him take the shirt off.

"No no no..." Caden reached out his hand, when Bailey grabbed the hem of the shirt. "Leave it on and get back here." Quickly he grabbed Bailey's hand, tugged him closer and yanked him onto the bed. Jeans and other pieces of clothing tangled around Bailey's feet, crippling him for a few seconds, but Caden looked victorious once Bailey lay on the bed. He looked even happier with himself, once he rolled on top of Bailey. "Now this is better."

Bailey lay limply and pretended not to notice how eagerly Caden pressed his body against Bailey's. "You're suffocating me."

Caden chuckled and nuzzled his face against Bailey's cheek. "No I'm not." His hand crept up underneath the hem of the shirt, fingers sliding against

Bailey's side. It tickled and gave him goose bumps, and he wanted to laugh a little, but instead he sighed listlessly.

"You're too heavy."

"I know I'm not."

"Seriously, Caden, I can't breathe."

"Oh... am I making you breathless?" It was insane how egoistically someone could say things like that, like Caden actually thought he was that good and gorgeous and fantastic and still, now that Bailey kind of knew the man, he knew Caden didn't really think that. He just wanted Bailey to think he did. Just like Bailey wanted to keep up the act and not give in, though on the inside his flesh and bones and blood were all waiting and willing and ready. Caden did it that easily.

Bailey let out a smile, just a small one, and Caden's wandering touch stilled, brown eyes looking black through the darkness. Caden's weight felt so okay and comfortable on top of Bailey, when the man just stayed there, watching Bailey. "I like this on you," he murmured, tugging on the hem of the shirt. "It's hot."

"It's cotton," Bailey retorted dryly.

Caden nodded his agreement, fingers still playing with the shirt. "It's sexy."

"It's faded and worn and too big on me."

Leaning down, Caden nudged his lips against Bailey's. "It's mine." Another nudge, this time a little more persistent, Bailey's lips parted briefly before Caden pulled back. "It's on you." Now it was a nibble, sending sweet shivers all the way down to Bailey's toes. "You do the math." Stupidly possessive comments like that should've told Bailey to walk out and stay gone, but instead he wanted to curl into a ball and stay in Caden's bed for as long as he was allowed to, maybe wear something else of Caden's and get to hear more stupidly possessive things. Hearing it made him feel hot, it made him feel sexy and almost too irresistible and wanted. The way Caden looked at him, eyes dark and heavy-lidded and lips capturing small bits of Bailey's mouth every now and then before the man pulled away, made Bailey's odd side push out, and the familiar part of him slid quietly into the back. He didn't shy away from Caden; instead he welcomed it when the man leaned down. Sometimes it provoked passion, hard and quick and heated. Sometimes it smoothed everything out, until everything around him was soft and mellow and floaty. Now it was the latter.

Still tired and sleepy after forcing himself out of bed too quickly, Bailey relished Caden's warmth, loving the feeling of being surrounded and held. What could've turned into a raging competition of whose self-control lasted the longest, now mellowed down to small pecks and slow lazy nudges and caresses, neither of them in a hurry to start anything. It was the perfect way to start a day, slow and time-consuming touches waking nerves and senses to a new day and better things. With this start, it couldn't possibly be worse than the one before.

Bailey realized he liked his things just the way they were. It was hard to imagine anything better.

The thought paralyzed him for a moment. Caden's lips brushed over his, fingers still wandering beneath the shirt, but for a second or two Bailey was numb to any touches. His mind raced around the room, around him and Caden and the way they were, around the collection of clothes tossed on the floor and all those million little things Bailey had forgotten to do that weekend, because he'd been too preoccupied by Caden.

Above him Caden's eyes looked at him intensely, the gaze so steady and firm, Bailey could literally feel Caden's mind work around any possible issues and then pick the most probably one. "Everything okay?" he asked, fingers sweeping along Bailey's jaw before another small kiss was placed on his senseless lips.

Bailey nodded, then shook his head. "I need to get up." Caden's weight was suffocating now, like tons and tons of immovable mass dropped on top of Bailey. He pushed Caden away, his hands feeble and weak. If it was solely up to his performance, he probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere, but Caden pulled back and rolled over to his side, giving Bailey room to move. Immediately he got up, something like longing aching painfully inside him when Caden was no longer there.

When Bailey closed the bathroom door behind him and switched the lights on, the fluorescent lamp above the sink flickered before casting a steady glow around the bathroom. He washed his hands, hoping ice-cold water would bring sense back into his head. Then he washed his face, once, twice, before pushing his wet, cold hands beneath his borrowed shirt and pressing his palms flat against his aching sides. He felt like his heart would race out of his body any second now. His pulse was insane, hammering against his chest, his ribs, and lungs and spine.

Staring at his reflection, Bailey saw the paleness of his skin, his complexion almost gray now that he was fully awake. He hadn't felt this confused and lost

in years, not since his stupid teen years when hormones ruled over common sense and made people act stupid. The hollow weight in his chest wouldn't let go, no matter how tightly he pressed his hands against his body. It stayed and multiplied, and all the while his feet wanted to turn and walk back into the bedroom, climb back in bed and not move. But that was not his place, so why did he want it so badly?

One night, months ago, came to mind, one phone call and casually spoken words Bailey had never really understood, but now they were crystal clear. Words telling him it wasn't working, saying they should end it because going on would be like fighting a lost battle. Bailey hadn't understood why, he couldn't have wrapped his mind around something so simple, because to him there was always a way, but Liam hadn't given him the chance to find that way. Now he understood, if not for anything else then for that carefully hidden part within himself that still believed in happily-ever-afters. Somehow he'd managed to con himself into thinking this secret get-away of his could actually last; that those smiles and touches he saw and felt night after night right outside that door would be his for good.

Lowering his hands to the side of the sink, Bailey inhaled slowly, exhaled even slower. Outside the door he could hear Caden moving around, sounds of a zipper and closet doors and springs on the mattress piercing through Bailey's head, so loud he wanted to press his hands to his ears and pretend there was nothing but quietness. Just the thought of walking out and seeing Caden, Caden with his irritating grin and carefree attitude, made Bailey cringe. Caden with his stupid dimple and prickly stubble and calloused palms and all those annoying habits Bailey hated so much, and still he didn't mind any of them. And he couldn't, though he tried, understand how things had come to this. His simple and easy no-strings-attached route to casual freedom had turned around and morphed into emotional chains, ones he feared he couldn't shake off as easily as he'd thought.

A knock on the door made him jerk against the sink, his hand grasping the white porcelain when he turned to look at the door.

"Bay?" Caden knocked on the door again, quietly speaking through the wood. "Everything okay?"

Bailey stood up, casting one more look at the mirror, before he walked to the door and pushed it open. "Yeah, I'm fine." Caden's eyes searched his face, a small furrow between dark brows. Bailey didn't dare to look at him for too

long, because everything would've showed on his face. Instead he stepped past Caden, prepared for the typical teasing chuckles and comments, and fearing he couldn't strike back. Caden didn't chuckle. He didn't say anything. His hand caught Bailey's wrist and held him in place, two steps placing Caden back in front of Bailey, and one more taking them back to the situation Bailey had run away from earlier. Chest to chest, fingers entwined for a second, before Caden's hands slid up along Bailey's arms.

"You're ice-cold," Caden murmured against his hair. Bailey closed his eyes, dwelling on the comforting touches placed all over his body. It felt safe, though he knew it wasn't, and it was stupid of him to trust in this. Still, he didn't move away when Caden nudged him closer, hands sliding over Bailey's arms and back. It may have been the kind of touch he needed right now, but it felt wrong, like a fraud. It felt like cheap condolences, seconds before infatuation would wear off, and Bailey would once again be just Bailey, not something exciting and thrilling and desirable. Just common, old, neat-freak Bailey with too many ticks and issues.

Pulling back, Bailey painted a neutral but civil smile on his face. "I think it's the flu... maybe it isn't fully gone yet."

Caden's hand lingered along Bailey's arm, like the man was reluctant to let go. "Back to bed then." Practically ushered to the bed, Bailey reveled in the feeling of Caden's body pressed tightly against his once they reached the sheets. He couldn't stop himself from dwelling on how good it felt to be this close to someone, though he knew it would only hurt him in the end. After all, Caden had made it clear from the start, Bailey was not his type. Why should that change?

Encircled and held, it took very little time for Bailey to drift off to sleep. Even as sleep took over, and the bright morning light left behind reality cold enough to hurt Bailey to his bones, he imagined the soft sweeps of lips against his temple, and quietly murmured words he couldn't make sense of, but he still heard them right to the bottom of his core.

For what felt like the hundredth time within the past hour, Caden found himself by the bedroom door, looking over to the bed where Bailey was still fast asleep. He was sprawled across the sheets, his left arm hanging off the mattress while his right was tucked tightly under the pillow beneath his head. He'd lain like that since he fell asleep hours earlier; soundless, motionless. He

never snored, never made those weird sounds people sometimes make in their sleep. He just lay still, calm and relaxed.

Caden could've watched him for hours.

Coming face to face with something this raw was new to Caden. He wasn't ashamed by his past, by the number of men he'd had in his bed, but for the first time he felt he could've gotten something a lot better if he'd just waited a little longer. Ethan always joked about how picky Caden was, how no one was ever good enough for more than one night but it wasn't really about that. None of them had caught his eye for more than a few hours. Where was the harm in that? He never lied, never promised anything more than what he was willing to give, and that seemed to be okay with them. Now the thought of picking up a random guy with the right looks left him completely cold. He had everything he needed in his bed right now.

Turning away from the door, Caden rubbed a hand across his face and headed to the kitchen. Kitty moped on the couch, severely devastated that she'd been denied access to the bedroom, but while Caden didn't mind the cat hair, Bailey did. Therefore Kitty would just have to learn to stay away. Caden would rather endure her pouting than Bailey's.

On his way to the kitchen he picked up a handful of clothes and other random things from the floor. Bailey's sunglasses were squashed, and Caden tossed them in the trash, trying to remember whether it had been him or Bailey who'd stepped on them once they'd gotten inside and literally raced to the bedroom. Probably Caden. It had been him chasing Bailey, not the other way around. Around the living room, around the bedroom, around the bed... hours and hours and hours. Who knew behind that stoic front was someone that playful?

Empowered and oddly chipper, filled with the memory of the night before, Caden started breakfast. What had happened early in the morning cast a dark shadow over good memories; Caden wasn't one hundred percent convinced Bailey's mild case of meltdown had anything to do with the flu, but he knew better than to start pushing. All he could do was hope Bailey would tell him if the man felt it should be talked about. For now, all Caden could do was wait.

He didn't bother trying to keep quiet, because Bailey wasn't exactly a light sleeper, and even if he did wake up, Caden wouldn't mind the company. Turned out this was one of those mornings where Bailey snapped out of it the second Caden started making noise. Too bad Bailey wasn't a morning person

either; Caden was prepared to find a pissed-off Bailey standing by the kitchen door. Instead what he got a few moments later was a drowsy Bailey who looked adorable with his baffled demeanor. "Are you trying to wake the whole house?"

"Good morning to you too." Caden liked the look on Bailey, especially with his clothes replacing the ones Caden had gathered from the floor.

Bailey tugged on the hem of Caden's T-shirt, looking uncomfortable. "I still couldn't find my clothes."

Caden nodded towards the living room. "On the chair." With a smile he continued. "Folded and all."

"Thanks." Not acting like himself, Bailey hesitated by the door, as if he wasn't sure if he should get changed immediately. Caden didn't mind seeing his clothes on Bailey, though they did look a little off. Black was not Bailey's color for sure. Still, the whole package looked good in Caden's eyes.

He reached out his hand before Bailey stepped into the living room and pulled the man inside the kitchen. "This looks good on you," he said and tugged on the hem of the shirt draped across Bailey's upper body. Hazel eyes rolled in their sockets, as if Bailey thought Caden was insane. He was sure, he wasn't. "It's still sexy." Never giving Bailey a chance to respond, Caden leaned in and pecked Bailey's lips. It was dry and close-mouthed and very chaste, until after a second or two Bailey's lips quivered barely noticeably, and it turned into moist and open-mouthed and very sensual. With a little morning breath and so lazy it couldn't possibly match what Caden had in mind, Bailey's mouth was still better than anyone else's, and Caden couldn't have asked for a better good morning.

It would've turned into hot and borderline hazardous if it wasn't for the demanding rumble vibrating somewhere beneath Bailey's windpipes. Caden pulled back and watched Bailey frown awkwardly. "Starving, yes." Bailey didn't move to step away, though. Instead he remained where he was, standing in the circle of Caden's arms. It was still strikingly obvious, he wasn't comfortable being there, that this much closeness was not okay with him, but Caden figured the man was willing to work on it since he didn't run out.

Bailey insisted he'd make his own breakfast. Caden allowed it, until after a while he realized Bailey's picture-perfect habits didn't spread out into the kitchen.

"How can you not fry an egg?"

“Your pan is crap.”

“My pan is perfect. You just don’t know how to fry an egg.”

“I *do* know.”

“Then why is it black?”

Bailey huffed indignantly and stepped away from the stove, gesturing towards the mess on the frying pan. “Fine. You do it then.” He crossed his arms over his chest, face twisted with haughtiness.

Caden chuckled quietly and got rid of the mess Bailey had managed to create in less than five minutes. “You have two hundred cooking books, and you don’t know how to fry an egg? How is that possible?”

“Are you absolutely sure you made your point clear?” Bailey asked. “You don’t want to say it a couple more times? Bailey doesn’t know how to fry an egg. Fine, you’re right. I don’t know. Happy now?”

“I was only curious.”

“No. You just wanted to rub it in.”

Shrugging, Caden placed the cleaned pan back on the stove. “Maybe that, too.” A little bit of butter and one egg with a bright yellow yolk spread beautifully on the pan. “But it’s nice to know you don’t master everything.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Bailey...” Caden smiled gently and tapped Bailey on the shoulder. “If your nutrition depended solely on yourself, you’d starve to death.”

“That is not...” Bailey closed his mouth, glowering at the pan. After a while he shrugged nonchalantly. “I know how to cook a little bit.”

“Yeah, mac and cheese. That’s about it.”

“And Bolognese sauce.”

“From a can.”

“And curry chicken.”

Now Caden laughed out loud. “Oh, come on!” He glanced at Bailey. “You did not make that yourself.”

“I did too.” Bailey stared back stubbornly but eventually lowered his eyes when Caden wouldn’t budge. With a shrug, Bailey nestled against the counter.

"I might've had some help." He fidgeted with the hem of the shirt, embarrassed. Caden thought that was endearing. And cute. And sort of disconcerting too, if you really thought about it.

"No one expects you to be perfect at everything." He picked up a spatula from the counter and flipped the egg onto a plate. "No one expects you to be perfect at *anything*." No one but Bailey, but it was pointless to say that out loud. "Perfect is no fun. I'd have a lot less chances to make fun of you if you weren't so flawed." He pushed the plate in front of Bailey, trying really hard not to look proud once his fried egg turned out pretty and un-burned.

Bailey looked down at the plate. After a moment he peeked up, chewing on his bottom lip. "Can you make me another one?"

Caden glanced at the plate, then up at Bailey. "What's wrong with this one?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. It's just..." He grimaced. "The yolk... I don't like it when it's all runny." He looked at Caden like there was some logic to his mood swings, and Caden tried really hard not to point out how Bailey was actually really irrational, though he was determined to prove to everyone he wasn't.

"Why didn't you just say that before?"

"Because you had to prove to the world that you're a manly man who knows how to fry a perfect egg." Bailey smiled affectedly sweet and gave Caden's cheek a pat. "Yes, Caden, it turned out wonderful." He dropped his hand. "Now can you make me one that's fried on both sides?" With a lot less pretence, he smiled this fleeting little smile of his, Caden saw too rarely. "Pretty please?"

Maybe it was the playfulness or the teasing or the way Bailey managed to knock Caden down from his self-proclaimed pedestal and make him feel ten feet tall at the same time, but something dwelled in Caden's chest when he now looked at Bailey. Bailey in Caden's kitchen on a Saturday morning, wearing Caden's shirt and sweatpants that were too big and woolen socks that were constantly sliding off. Bailey being there without the typical hurry to get out and go home.

"Just one?" Caden asked absently. He was only partly focused on Bailey saying he'd like two, please, and more focused on Bailey moving two steps away to start the coffee. At Caden's he made it extra-strong, though Caden

knew Bailey didn't really like it that way, and Caden had been thoughtful enough to start packing his fridge with milk though he didn't drink it himself. Bailey had noticed, but he hadn't asked about it, just like Caden hadn't asked why Bailey insisted on making coffee he didn't like.

Bailey liked his eggs. He actually said so. He said no when Caden asked him if he wanted toast and seemed content munching down his breakfast moistened with apple juice and tar-like coffee mixed with skim milk. Caden's kitchen was tiny, seeming even smaller with the table in there, and the whole scene was so cozy, it should've given Caden goose bumps. Instead it made him calm and oddly comfortable. Knowing that the man sitting across from him caused the comfortable sensation probably should've set off some sorts of alarms, but it didn't. It was just weird. Not scary, not paralyzing. Just weird.

Caden probably would've dwelled on what he was feeling, why feeling that way felt like it did, but Bailey's reactions took away the pressure of contemplating numerous what-ifs. The man had a whole variety of comebacks for whatever comments Caden made and like always, he didn't shy away from using each one, but underneath that, buried somewhere miles deep, were other things Caden hadn't noticed before. Bailey seemed confused when Caden poured him more coffee. He was quiet for eleven whole seconds when Caden said he could go back to bed and take a nap while Caden cleared out the dishes. Eleven seconds was precise. Caden counted. Bailey seemed thrown off by any possible signs of genuine kindness. Other types of kindness they'd done, and it was fun too, but for now, Caden had absolutely no desire to act petty or vindictive. He just wanted to be nice. Bailey didn't seem to understand this, or he just didn't know how to act around people who were trying to do nice things for him. Seeing him stumble through their first actual shared morning after convinced Caden that the guys Bailey had dated in the past were all jerks. Bailey took independence to a whole new level, but Caden could see how he liked a little pampering. If Caden could see that, how could others not?

Within the next few days little things grew into huge entities. Bailey's absent smile when he found his favorite brand of apple juice in Caden's fridge, or the silence that followed when he woke up in the morning, held tightly against Caden who had been awake forever just waiting for Bailey to wake up too. Random late-night visits quickly turned into phone calls and not-so-random appearances right after work, Caden becoming more and more familiar with Bailey's home as he started spending time there as much as Bailey spent time in his.

All the while, the wariness in Bailey's behavior remained, at times almost disappearing when Caden did something he didn't really think about, but that obviously pleased Bailey. But it was still there. The only times Caden couldn't see it was when he had Bailey stripped of his typical protective layers, sometimes in the middle of the night when the air around them was scorching hot, and it was almost painful to breathe. Bailey was quiet, just like he always was, but Caden had learned to read those tiny signs which marked his path and told him when he'd found the right touches and tender spots. It was the shuddering breath when Caden held Bailey down on the bed, controlling and waiting for shallow obedience, or the way Bailey's nails dug into Caden's back hard enough to hurt barely seconds before crippling pleasure. It was the weak squeeze minutes after the frenzy was over, and the way Bailey instinctively followed in his sleep when Caden moved to get out of bed. And every time, every single time, Caden wished he could have Bailey like that every hour of the day, without worries and concerns corrupting him, because Bailey was gorgeous like that. He looked unlike anything Caden had ever seen before, and without a doubt Caden knew this was a side of the man no one else had ever seen. It was all Caden's.

But then morning came, and Bailey woke up, silent and distant, and Caden didn't know how to break through that. He didn't dare demand explanations or reasons, because he feared at the end he'd have nothing. Not even the crippled version of Bailey. So it went on, fragmented and frail during the day but so strong and overruling during the night that it was impossible to remain whole while it happened. And Caden, who had never wanted to commit to anyone and who'd always appreciated his freedom more than anything, found himself desperate for that very commitment he'd always looked down on. It toyed with him, that desperation. It played games with his mind and made him feel ten feet tall in the wake of Bailey's every smile. Every time he saw Bailey, it made his heart skip a beat and chant words like "beautiful" and "perfect" and "lovely". Impossible, stubborn, and neurotic were right there with those slightly more adulatory words. But it wasn't about the characteristics or the looks, though Caden definitely appreciated Bailey's looks. It was something on the inside of Bailey, something Caden couldn't see, but he felt it stronger than he'd ever felt anything.

What could it be... what could it be?

It got more and more difficult, the more times Bailey woke up in Caden's bed with Caden's arms wrapped around him. Each time was strange for Bailey.

He knew where he was, who he was with, but he couldn't pull away and slide away to a safe distance. Being held felt too good. He hadn't realized he missed being close to someone like that; he and Liam had rarely slept this close to one another and when they had, Liam had usually been the one to pull away, saying he got too hot, and it was uncomfortable. Now Bailey was cradled so close to someone, he was sure he'd never been held this closely before.

Lying on his back, Caden's arms were secured lightly around Bailey's shoulders, his breath washing warmly over Bailey's temple in time with Caden's exhales. His chest felt solid and warm beneath Bailey's cheek, the steady beat of his heart echoing softly in Bailey's ears. This was something new, something *they* hadn't done before, and for the first time during their joined adventure, Bailey had no idea what to do. Even when physical closeness and intimacy had been difficult for Bailey to digest, he'd still had his rules to cling to, in order to come to terms with what was happening. Now the rules had all been broken, and he didn't know what to do. He just lay limp, nestling in the warmth of Caden's body and the mellow scent of mint floating from the skin beneath his.

The longer it went on, the more sensitive Bailey became to Caden's moods. Behind the nature of the jokester were so many layers of intensity and passion, Bailey swore it would take him a lifetime to find his way through it all. This odd union of theirs might have started off as something simple and insignificant. Now it felt like an actual relationship, except for the part where no one knew, and they were still sneaking around, pretending to hate each other's guts. It had gotten to a point where Bailey was in danger of bringing Caden up in every conversation he had, and talking about his pastime activities was really difficult without mentioning Caden, because it seemed Bailey didn't do anything without the man anymore. Weekends had expanded into weekdays, and Bailey could no longer remember the last time he'd slept alone. His home, his own private box in the craziness of the world, was permanently infected by Caden's habits and antics; there were dirty socks under Bailey's bed, and coffee cups left on the counter, and someone else's keys ending up in his pocket when he left for work in the morning. It was physically painful for him to walk into a room with Caden in it and not go up to the man. Every time this happened when someone else was there, Bailey had to turn away and explain to himself why he couldn't do what he wanted. Lately, though, his explanations had been less and less convincing.

Being in the presence of other people was a struggle, not only because Bailey felt a physical need to be close to Caden, but because Caden seemed to

feel the same way. The only difference was that he sometimes forgot why they shouldn't let it show. He might accidentally stroke his hand along Bailey's back or lace their fingers together if they stood close to one another, and every time Bailey shied away, searching for control while his heart pounded in his chest because he feared someone might've seen them. As days went by, Caden's response to Bailey's retreat grew more and more ill-tempered, but what pushed the man over the edge was Cam's not so discreetly placed comments about all of the wonderful, single gay men just waiting to get caught by Bailey. It was probably the most awkward Sunday dinner Bailey had ever been to. Cam was practically vulgar while explaining why exactly Bailey should start dating again, and all the while Caden sat across the table from him, looking like he would break something if the conversation didn't end soon. Those comments became more and more regular, and the longer it went on, the more agitated Caden got. Afterwards, when they were behind closed doors, and there was no one to witness what really kept Bailey from agreeing with Cam's suggestions, Caden proved to himself, but most of all to Bailey, that there was very little left of Bailey for anyone else to feast on. Time and time again he became a mindless puppet for Caden to play with and not once did Bailey protest. It got to a point where it was almost like a game, where he'd provoke Caden more and more just to see how far he could go before he'd crossed the line, and each time he'd lie breathless and sore afterwards, so completely saturated with Caden's scent and touches, it was positively sickening. And Bailey loved it. Shouldn't that have told him they were heading for disaster? Yes, definitely. Still Bailey failed to read the signs, and he was stunned silent on one Saturday morning when Caden was yet again spending his time running his hands all over Bailey, quiet murmurs bringing a smile to Bailey's face and a dangerous lightness in his heart.

“Bay?”

“Mmm?”

And then a few simple words brought him crashing down, like someone had just told him his life was ending.

“You know I'm falling for you, right?”

The second he said it, he knew it was a mistake. Bailey went stiff next to him, the smile Caden hadn't seen but had felt oozing through every pore in

Bailey's body vanished in thin air just like that. He probably should've said something to ease the discomfort, but Caden had never been one for courtesy. "It shouldn't come as a surprise." It tasted like acid on his tongue, the bitter tone sharp enough to cut through paper, but once it was out, Caden realized he didn't even want to take it back.

Skin crawling with disappointment, Caden got off the bed and went for his clothes. Behind him he could hear Bailey move, sounds of fabric on fabric filling his mind with excruciating details. It felt like a slideshow of everything he and Bailey had ever done was going on fast-forward right in front of his eyes, only there was no pause button for him to still the picture and enjoy the sweet frames. He would've liked to skip the painful ones altogether.

"I wasn't expecting that." Confused and quiet, Bailey sounded nothing like himself. "I don't know what to say."

Caden snorted dryly, fingers fighting with the zipper of his jeans. "That's a first."

"Don't be like that."

"Like what?" Whirling around, Caden faced Bailey who still sat on the bed with the sheets pulled all the way up to his chin. "Disappointed? Frustrated? Why should I, right? I should just settle for being your little secret."

"Caden... I thought we agreed—"

"*You* agreed." It was wrong to blame it all on Bailey, but a lot of things were wrong right now. "You made the rules. You wanted to keep it a secret."

"You said it was just casual—"

"Yeah, weeks ago!" Without thinking about it, Caden raised his voice. "I changed my mind, okay? I have a right to do that, don't I? It's not casual anymore, and I don't want it to be."

Caden's voice was much too hard and definitely too loud, and still he wanted to shout it out louder. Bailey remained on the bed, hands squeezed together in his lap. "It's not fair of you to ask me for this." He sounded so reasonable, like he wasn't talking about anything more meaningful than yesterday's dinner. "*We* agreed that this would not leave the bedroom and—"

"Wake the fuck up, Bailey! It left the bedroom two months ago."

"Please don't yell at me."

Caden stared towards the bed, impossibly angry and hurt by the bland look on Bailey's face. "I want you to go out with me. On a date. A proper date, Bailey."

"What's wrong with what we do now?" There was an urgent tone in Bailey's voice as he tried to reason. "I like this. Why does this have to change?"

"Because this isn't enough for me." Caden grabbed his shirt from the floor, but it hung limply in his fingers. "I don't wanna sneak around and pretend there's nothing going on, all the while having to listen to Cam come up with guys you should go out with, and you just let her go on. You think *that's* fair?"

"Well, what do you want me to do? I can't stop her from talking."

"You can tell her you're already seeing someone."

Bailey looked back, mouth open in mid-sentence. The look on his face, first confusion and then discomfort, made his soft voice sound ridiculously sharp. "But I'm not." He said it kindly, like you would speak to a child when you told them mommy and daddy were actually the ones who bought the Christmas presents, and the milk and cookies were just for the show. Caden was pretty sure this was exactly how it felt to wake up from a lie.

"Right." He nodded slowly and started pulling on the shirt. It hit him that Bailey had worn the piece too at some point during the night, and now it smelled like some tacky, sweet body lotion. It smelled just like Bailey.

"Come on, Caden..." Bailey rose up to his knees, the sheets dragged along when he slid to the edge of the bed. "We can't even agree on what to watch on TV. Why spoil this with something that would never work?" His short, blond hair was frizzy, and it looked soft, and every single word coming out of Bailey's mouth sounded more and more acidic in Caden's ears. "You said it yourself; I'm not your type. Maybe you think that has changed, but it—"

"I never said it changed." Looking toward the bed where Bailey's freckled face was twisted with misery, Caden thought back to weeks before when one odd evening had turned everything upside down. "You're not my type, but my type never stuck around, and I never wanted it to. I never wanted to see any of them every single day or walk on the street with them and hold their hand if I felt like it without worrying that someone might see us."

"But we don't do that, Caden."

“Why not?” Caden wanted to pull his hair out. Trying to explain simple things to Bailey was like hitting his head against a wall when the man simply refused to understand. It didn't help that Bailey looked scared and confused and weak, that his hands were fisted around the sheet, or that the longer the conversation went on the less strength his words seemed to have. It didn't help, and it didn't matter, because his eyes still said no. Brown and green ponds still said no and begged Caden to agree. And he just couldn't. “Can't you just give in this one time? It won't kill you, Bailey. You act like none of this matters to you, like you don't give a shit what happens, but I know you do, because you would not come to me every day if you didn't want this as much as I do.”

“What we have now, yes. That's it.” Straightening his posture, the man looked up. “That's all.”

Back to calm and collected, the only thing giving away what was happening inside Bailey was the glistering gaze in his eyes. Caden knew that look. “Liar.” He nodded at Bailey's blink. “What are you really scared of?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit,” Caden spat. “You cling on to me in your sleep like you'll die if I leave, and then you wake up, and it's like I can't even touch you without breaking some goddamn rule.” The confused frown on Bailey's face only fueled Caden's fury. “You pretend you don't care, that nothing can touch you, but that's not true, now is it? Is that what you're so scared of? That someone sees it, and then you can't hide behind that perfect front anymore?”

Bailey looked away, head bowed while he cradled the sheets tighter over his lap. “Shut up, Caden,” he said calmly, eyes held low. Caden didn't. He couldn't. Unless someone stuffed a sock in his mouth and taped it with duct tape, there was nothing that would stop him from speaking. “It's like you hand out these small bits of yourself, and everything else stays locked away, and if someone asks for more, you just give up because you don't think it'll last. Why is that? Is it because you just expect people to fuck up and once they do, you don't bother trying to work things out? It's easier to just give up, right?”

Bailey shot a glare at Caden, speaking so quietly, it was almost ridiculous how cold his tone was. “Really, stop talking right now.”

“Why? Am I wrong? You won't go out with me because you don't think it'll work out. Did it work out with Liam? No. How about the guy before him? It never works out, because no one can live up to your expectations, even when

they really try to. Everybody fucks up,” Caden spoke slowly. “You deal with it, and then you move on. But you...” Shaking his head, Caden was transfixed by the expectant look on Bailey’s face. “You already made up your mind and I haven’t even fucked up yet. That’s gonna make you lonely, Bailey. You’ll never find anyone who sticks around if you keep doing this, because it is virtually impossible for anyone to love a person who’s incapable of loving them back.” His voice rang out loud, so loud it was nearly deafening, and all Caden could do was stare at Bailey’s wide-eyed face, sheer shock reflected in his eyes. For a split second, just long enough for Caden to notice, something pushed through the curtain of surprise and showed the most vulnerable parts of the man still sitting on the bed. It looked broken and sore and ugly. And then Bailey looked away, hands squeezed so tightly around the sheets, his knuckles turned white.

Guilt had never rushed to Caden like it did now, breaking through every inch of him while he saw his words hit their target. “Bailey...”

“Can I be alone for a minute? I need to get dressed.”

Taking a step towards the bed, Caden tried to find his way back to that spot where he’d seen more than the carefully placed front, but Bailey pulled away. “Just one minute.”

“Bay—”

“Can you just leave?” It was the closest to a shout Caden had ever heard from Bailey. Hazel eyes flicked up, anger and hurt blending flawlessly. “At least let me get dressed before you continue.”

“I won’t do that. I’m sorry, I—”

Bailey jerked back, the sheets pulled tightly around him. “Just get out.” Jaw set tight, he stared at the floor, looking like he was inches away from shaking. Something tight and burning tangled inside Caden’s throat, preventing any words from coming out. He took a step back, then another, soon standing outside the bedroom. He closed the door behind him and stared at the door handle, desperate to grab it and go back inside. Instead his hand pressed flat against the door, his forehead inches above his fingertips. “I’m sorry, Bailey. I didn’t mean it.” He closed his eyes and listened, hoping to hear even one word from the other side of the door, but all he heard was silence.

“Can we please just talk about this?” he asked, pleaded, lost for whatever words would make it better. “You don’t have to leave. I don’t want you to. I

just want to talk this through.” A shallow thump from the other side of the door was all he heard, and it only multiplied the quietness in his home. “Please say something.”

The door was yanked open so abruptly Caden didn't have time to step back, and Bailey stormed out of the bedroom, knocking Caden to the side. By the look of it he didn't plan on staying and talking about things.

Helplessly, Caden stood by the door for a few unforgivable seconds as Bailey crossed the living room and headed for the door. By the time Caden's feet started working, Bailey had already reached the hall.

“Don't leave like this.”

“It's better that I go.” Bailey grabbed his bag from the floor by the coat rack, every movement sharp and angry. “It's safer this way... before you say anything else offensive and completely unnecessary.”

Caden opened his mouth to perhaps defend himself—not that he hadn't done wrong, but Bailey turned to him, one look from his eyes managing to quiet Caden. “This ends right here.” He nodded quickly when Caden shook his head. “It was fun while it lasted, et cetera, et cetera...” Turning for the door, Bailey waved his hand and left Caden stunned and silent by the couch. The man was gone before Caden managed to utter a word, like a human tornado sweeping through Caden's home and life, and then he was gone just like that. Minutes went by before Kitty stepped onto the scene. She looked pleased and comfortable, climbing onto the couch and looking up at Caden. To him, her expression looked malicious.

“What are you staring at?” He realized he was being snappy at a cat but who cared. Who else was he going to be snappy at?

After going home, shaking so badly he feared his bones would collapse, Bailey calmed down, drank a cup of tea, and made a list of all the things he hated about Caden. The list turned out to be very long. Maybe it was a way of coping, but Bailey didn't care what excuses he had to use to get over the blunt outrage he was feeling.

How dare Caden? Who gave him the right to judge Bailey, like he himself was so magnificent, he'd never made a mistake in his life? Their latest conversation only convinced Bailey further of the fact that they simply would not blend well. He no longer cared if he at times felt some silly happiness in

Caden's presence; it was just his hormones overruling logical thinking. He would never fall for a man who could slaughter someone the way Caden had. There was no need to get personal, not even if Caden felt his feelings were hurt.

Bailey didn't even try to avoid Caden; why should he? He had every right to feel the way he did, and if Caden had an issue with that—as he seemed to have—that was his problem. Bailey was perfectly fine going back a few months and returning to mutual dislike. Actually, it was one-sided, since Caden still tried to make things better. He still called, though Bailey had told him not to. He still tried to make conversation when they met at Cam's, but Bailey ignored him and wouldn't listen to a word. He wasn't interested in anything Caden had to say. He'd heard enough. This, of course, caused a few raised eyebrows, and the others seemed to tiptoe around Bailey, like he might accidentally explode. That was just ridiculous. He, for one, knew how to handle his temper. They should all just worry whether or not Caden could do the same.

It gave Bailey some type of satisfaction to see Caden's efforts meet with no success. Their blossoming yet destined-to-fail relationship would've died eventually, so it was only better that it happened quickly. Bailey would've hated for it to drag on and on, with him ending up being the one who'd get his heart broken. It was better this way. Caden would realize it eventually as well. So Bailey believed. Nine days after their last actual conversation, he realized he was wrong.

It was a bad day right from the start. It was hot and sunny and sweaty, and Bailey's eyes were sore since he forgot to get his eye drops from the pharmacist. His eyes weren't the only things that suffered from the allergy; his skin was itching, and he kept sneezing like the flu had taken over his system again. On top of feeling like his face was swollen and his nose was clogged, his washing machine broke down and leaked water on the floor, which meant he had to mop the floors and try to save his clothes. This ultimately meant he was nearly two hours late, by the time he finally got to Cam's. Her bubbly mood of the day didn't help his sour state of mind one bit, and neither did the conniving look on Caden's face, once the man caught sight of Bailey.

He'd seen that look before, so he should've known something was going to happen. Stupid Bailey for thinking he was off the hook.

Bailey was just getting ready to head upstairs and finish the paint job he'd started in the guestroom the day before, when Caden literally blocked his exit from the living room. "We need to talk."

Bailey tossed his head. "No, we don't." He stepped past Caden, but the man moved along with him, standing directly in Bailey's path. "We can either be civilized, or we can turn this into a shouting match. Whichever you prefer." The man had the audacity to stick his face up-close and personal to Bailey's. "One way or another, you and I will talk."

From the corner of his eye, Bailey saw Jenny dally by the backdoor. She pretended to be busy with the label of the fertilizer bottle dangling from her fingers, but those not-so-discreet glances she kept casting in Bailey's direction convinced him she had heard every word.

"You couldn't think of a better place to do this?" Bailey asked calmly, keeping his voice so low, Jenny hopefully couldn't hear him. Too bad Caden didn't do the same.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but I've been trying to do it for the past week, and it looks to me like you're leaving me with no other choice." Caden smelled of paint and thinner and saltiness of summer-warmed skin, and Bailey hated how easily his body recognized the combination.

Traitorous, traitorous hormones.

Cocking his chin, he met Caden's eyes. "I have nothing to say to you."

"And I have plenty to say to you."

"And I don't want to hear it."

Leaning closer still, Caden got right inside Bailey's personal space. "Tough." There was no grin, no dimple on his left cheek, no annoying smirks or chuckles or any of those million things Bailey had written down on his list. Caden looked like he would follow Bailey around until he'd actually get a say. It just sucked he chose this place, because their audience of one had now multiplied. Jeff and Ethan were now standing next to Jenny who no longer bothered to pretend she was reading through the label. She was shamelessly, openly goggling at Bailey and Caden. Caden, who apparently got sick of waiting, decided to take the lead.

Glancing over to the door, a devious little smile crept up to his lips. Right that second, Bailey knew he was in trouble. "Don't you dare," he hissed.

Caden cocked his brow. "My dear Bailey... you know very well, I do in fact dare." He stepped back, that cunning expression planted on his face. "You've never complained."

“What’s going on?” Cam stood by the door, just like the rest of them, but instead of looking entertained, she just looked confused. Bailey shook his head. “Nothing.”

Caden waved his hand dismissively. “We’re just having a lovers’ tiff.”

“Caden...”

“See, I said something Bailey didn’t like, and now he’s really making me work to get back on his good side.” Looking pleased with himself, Caden turned to their expectant audience. “I thought about wooing him with my charms, but I doubt it’s going to work. He’s a little funny like that.”

Feeling five pairs of eyes on him, Bailey could easily imagine how his face changed color. “Trust me... you’ve seen the last of my good side.” Oh yes... from now on Caden would only see the terrible, vindictive side of Bailey, the one where he’d dedicate his life to destroying Caden bit by bit. Of course Caden didn’t see it that way. “You’re so cute when you get mad.”

“Shut up, Caden.”

Cam shook her head, confused. “What the hell is going on here?”

“Nothing,” Bailey repeated, but for some reason everybody was looking at Caden. Probably because he was the one willing to give out all the dirty details. “Bailey and I have been joining forces for a good few months now. Ever since Jenny’s birthday, actually.” He flashed a bright smile in her direction. “It was one helluva party, by the way.”

Jenny blinked. “Joining forces...?”

“Sleeping together.”

“Caden...” Warning growls did nothing to Caden’s verbal diarrhea. “Casual sex with a little bit of breakfast in bed on the side.” He turned to Bailey, unbothered by the horrified glare on Bailey’s face. “Then I fell in love. Imagine that. And Bailey doesn’t believe me. So here we are, among friends, working through these stupid issues, just because you’re so stubborn you can’t see anything right in something you didn’t plan from the start.”

“It isn’t stubbornness.” All Bailey could see was Caden’s annoying I-got-it-right grin. “You didn’t fall in love. God... you admitted yourself you don’t even know what love is.”

“Oh, and you do?”

"I know it better than you do. At least I've had a meaningful relationship. Do you think I want to be your crash test dummy, so that you can just conveniently get rid of me when you get bored, and you realize a committed relationship isn't what you want after all?"

"Is that what this is about?" Caden shook his head laughing, *laughing*, like there was something funny about this. "When did you get so insecure?"

"This has nothing to do with insecurity, Caden. It's common sense." Bailey poked his finger against Caden's chest, nose stuck up. "You would just end up breaking my heart, so why the hell would I sign up for that?" The first thing he realized was that he'd just cursed. The second thing he realized was that he'd sort of just admitted feeling something more than hormonal dependency on Caden. The third thing he realized? Cam huffing by the door. One look at her and Bailey knew it wasn't just annoyed panting or her choking on her own laughter. The way her hand was pressed against the side of her belly while her other hand clung to the doorframe spoke volumes.

She shook her head, eyes pleading at Bailey. "Go on."

"Cam..."

"I'm fine. Just go on with the conversation!" Immediately after her eyes pressed shut, and she doubled over as far as she could. Next to her Rudy had gone white, his eyes bouncing around the room. "It's coming. The baby's coming."

"It is not." Cam shook her head. "Not for another two weeks." Her protests were pointless. By the time another cramp took over, Rudy started rushing her towards the door while the rest of them hunted for everything they needed to take along. Who knew there was so much stuff?

For a moment Bailey forgot about being mad at Caden. He was too busy being worried and thrilled for Cam. The resentment returned when they were all packed in the cars, Ethan and Jeff being the unfortunate ones who ended up in the same car with Caden and Bailey.

"I told you, you're scared," Caden said victoriously while steering the car into motion. On the passenger's seat, Bailey huffed. "And I told you, you're delusional."

"No wonder your relationships never work if you're this hardheaded. I'm starting to sympathize with Liam."

“Well I’m sure you two can have all sorts of nice talks about my impossible expectations.” Bailey stared out of the window, appalled by his own weakness. Caden’s words still hit home though Bailey had tried to convince himself he didn’t care. And why was he even surprised? It was just like Caden to kick him while he was already down.

“All I want is for you to give me a chance.”

“After what you just did?” Bailey looked at Caden, shocked. “Are you kidding me?”

“You left me no other choice,” Caden persisted. “I know I broke the rules, but didn’t I already do that when I fell in—”

“You did not fall in love with me!” Jeff’s agonized wail from the backseat forced Bailey to tone it down. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard in my life. You don’t even like me, you can’t stand it when I fuss over order, you *hate* my ‘nitpicky’ ways. If the sex wasn’t so good, you wouldn’t even think of anything more committed than quick penetration over the bathroom sink.”

It was Ethan’s turn to whine. “Way too much information.” Too bad neither Caden nor Bailey heard him.

“That was not quick,” Caden retorted. “And just because I hate something you do, doesn’t mean I can’t love you.”

“Stop saying that word.”

“Why? Does it start sounding real?”

“No. It gets more and more preposterous the more you say it.”

“Well, you better get used to it, because I’m not stopping.” Caden pouted like a little kid, and Bailey was perfectly capable of doing the same.

“Just drive the damn car,” he snarled. The atmosphere in the car was as toxic as one could expect, and it didn’t get any better by the time they got to the hospital. Ethan and Jeff quickly rushed inside while Bailey was left in Caden’s dazzling company. They didn’t speak to one another, not while they walked inside or stood in the elevator or reached the right floor. They were like two strangers with absolutely nothing to say to one another. Except that there was a lot that needed to be said.

Eventually it turned out to be a false alarm, but the doctors wanted to keep Cam in the hospital after her blood pressure went ballistic. They all wanted to

stay with her, but she insisted that everybody go home. She gave Bailey a few extremely sharp instructions, all of which consisted of him getting his head out of his ass and working things out with Caden, so that she could be convinced her baby girl would get the best godparents anyone could ever think of. Bailey didn't know whether he was happy that she'd trust him with something like that or concerned that he'd have to take on the job with Caden.

Prepared to take a cab, Bailey's annoyance skyrocketed when Caden literally dragged him across the parking lot. "You're coming with me." And still, a tiny, tiny part of Bailey was overjoyed by the harsh command, like it somehow made everything alright.

It did not.

Absolutely not.

Angry, anxious, and tired, Caden expected Bailey to follow him right inside, but instead the man remained in the hall, looking like he had no intention of taking a step further.

"Just get over here."

Bailey crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his shoulder against the wall. "I'll stay right here, thank you very much."

"I'll carry you inside if I have to."

"Hah." Bailey's mocking smirk vanished when Caden took a step towards him. The man sneaked inside quickly and took a seat on the armchair, looking displeased. "I have no idea what I'm doing here."

"We're going to finish the talk."

"It's finished. You say one thing, I disagree." Smiling pleasantly, Bailey managed to rile up Caden's temper. "Just like the good old days."

"Will you stop that?" Just looking at Bailey's cold scowling took the last of Caden's strength away. "Do you have to argue about everything? I don't want to fight with you. Why can't you see that?" He stared at Bailey, his eyes meeting nothing but resistance. Rubbing a hand across his face, Caden dropped into the armchair closest to the window. He leaned his elbows on his knees, suddenly so exhausted he wondered whether there was any point in this. "Just tell me what I have to do to make you understand that I'm serious about this."

Bailey remained relentless, eyes held somewhere on the floor. “You *think* you are.”

“No, I *know* I am.”

“You don’t—”

Caden stood up so quickly Bailey went quiet. He sat on the edge of the table in front of Bailey’s chair, grabbed a hold of the armrests and yanked the chair closer. “I know what I feel.” Bailey stared back with wide eyes, pulled back as far as possible while Caden’s hands framed his face and held him. Just held him. “You are impossible, and I don’t understand half of the things you do, but I don’t care. I don’t need to understand everything. It’s enough for me that I understand what it means when you get snappy in the morning, or when you don’t want to be left alone, though you always act like you don’t care if I stay or not.” Gently he wiped his thumbs across Bailey’s cheeks, searching for something in Bailey’s eyes he could hold on to. “I understand that you’re scared though you say you’re not, and I even understand why, and it’s okay because everybody gets scared. Just don’t push me away because of that.”

The resentment was gone. Looking startled, Bailey brought up his hands and locked them around Caden’s wrists. Slowly he pulled Caden’s hands away, the loss of his skin against Caden’s resembling the feeling in Caden’s chest.

Bailey stared down at his lap where he held Caden’s hands, fingers loosely wrapped around Caden’s wrists before they let go. Head bowed, he shook his head and pulled back. Caden didn’t need to see his eyes to know what he’d find there; it was all reflected in the motionless withdrawal happening right before his eyes.

“Bailey...” Even he could hear the wordless plea in his voice, and he wanted to ask “please”, wanted to beg and maybe make some sense, but Bailey shook his head again and squirmed out of the couch. Caden’s hand reached for him, but Bailey had already stepped away. He wiped his palms on the side of his denims, fingers flexing nervously once his arms settled by his sides.

“Is this because of what I said?” Caden tried, but Bailey shook his head again. He looked hurried, eyes scanning the room like he was unsure which way to turn.

“It would never work.”

Standing up, Caden turned to Bailey. “Why?”

With a sigh, Bailey shook his head, eyes finally meeting Caden's. "It just wouldn't."

Caden persisted. "Tell me why." He ignored the frustrated sigh from Bailey. "You have a reason for everything, so tell me why."

"Because you're not that kind of a guy." Bailey stared at him, smiling sadly. "Why love anyone else when there's so much to love about you. Do you remember that?"

"*That's* your reason?" Caden laughed, amused and angered at the same time. "Something I said as a joke weeks ago?"

"It wasn't a joke. Nothing we talked about that night was a joke, but you just won't take it seriously." Irritation literally beamed from Bailey's eyes. "I asked you not to tell anyone, and you still did."

"Who gives a shit? They don't care if—"

"But I do!" Bailey looked at him like he was looking at a stranger. "I care, Caden. You're probably used to people knowing who you hook up with, and you don't care whether everybody knows what happens in your personal life, but I like to keep things private. Do you think that's possible now? Do you really think no one's going to ask questions?"

"You don't need to answer them, Bailey. Let them talk."

"You just don't get it." Sighing heavily, Bailey shook his head. "My life is my life, and I don't want people to know everything about it. They know it now. They know that we've been 'joining forces' like you so kindly put it. It might not be a big deal to you, but it's a huge deal to me. What we had should be between you and me, not between you, me, and a group of people I happen to have on my speed-dial. That's not possible anymore. You forced me into this, and I can't believe you don't see that it's wrong."

Caden was starting to understand the true measure of the shit they were in. Never mind breaking a couple of rules. He'd broken *the* rule, the one Bailey apparently couldn't let go of.

"So that's it, huh? You're not even giving me a chance?"

"It wouldn't help. We obviously won't see eye to eye on this." Bailey readjusted the zipper of his jacket, the strap of his bag running across his chest. "This is why it would never work. We're too different and some things just can't be changed. Believe me, in a little while you'll realize this wasn't what you really wanted after all."

Glued to the floor, Caden just stood there and watched Bailey leave. He watched the door close behind Bailey, watched the empty space blend into a monochromatic shade of colors until it looked like no one had ever even stood there.

Cam was a glowing mother. Bailey understood that much though his mind wasn't quite up to processing any stimulation. It still amazed him how Caden could bounce up seconds after he woke up and look like he was having the time of his life, while getting up was an everyday battle for Bailey. He was definitely not a morning person, and since baby Molly decided to come into the world at four fifty-three in the morning, Bailey's endurance for rushed morning rituals was put to the test. But it was worth it. It was so worth it. It was even worth every glance and wondering look when he and Caden arrived seconds apart and wouldn't even look at each other.

In the morning, when the ordeals of the night were bygone, and both baby and mother were checked and cleared, Bailey sneaked into Cam's room. He found her on the bed with the baby cradled to her chest, Rudy napping in the chair next to the bed.

"Hi," Bailey whispered and quietly came closer. Cam looked up, a smile spreading over her face. "Hey... are you alone?"

Gesturing towards the door, Bailey eased his weight onto the edge of the bed. "Everybody's outside." Inside a pink blanket was a wrinkly, red, and tiny little thing. "They're all waiting to see you guys." He'd always thought newborns weren't really beautiful though everybody said they were, but this one was perfect.

Looking up at Cam, Bailey saw tears dangling on her lashes. She chuckled shortly. "I can't stop crying." Her eyes dropped on her baby, that small little bundle sleeping soundlessly in her arms. "Isn't she gorgeous?"

"She's perfect."

"Do you want to hold her?" Without waiting for Bailey's answer, Cam lifted Molly and guided her into Bailey's arms. It wasn't the first time he'd held a baby, but somehow she seemed so fragile and tiny, he was afraid he might break her. She weighed nothing at all, like air inside of a blanket.

Gently wiping the tips of his fingers across round, puffy cheeks, Bailey pretended not to see Cam's expectant glare. Couldn't she at least wait for the festivities to be over before she started interrogating him?

Cam laced her fingers over her stomach. "Well?" she drawled, batting her eyes at Bailey. "Anything you want to tell me?"

Bailey shrugged and repositioned the baby in his arms. "Not really."

Huffing indignantly, Cam glared at Bailey. "If I hadn't just gone through labor, and if you weren't holding my daughter, I'd slap you." She ogled Bailey. "You and Caden?"

"Yes."

"Really?" She threw her hands up. "Really?!"

Rudy jerked in his chair, eyes wide and gaze bouncing around the room. "What?"

"Nothing, honey," Cam smiled tenderly. "I'm just making sure Bailey here hasn't lost his mind."

Rudy eased back into the chair, rubbing a hand across his face. "Oh... we're back on that now?"

"Yes, we are." Cam's hawk's eyes turned back on Bailey. "When exactly did you plan on telling me?"

Why avoid the truth? "Never."

"Oh, oh... is this what things have come to? We stopped sharing, all of a sudden?" Cam crossed her arms over her chest and stared ahead. It might've passed as another one of her attempts to force others into guilt trips, but when her blue, glimmering eyes remained focused on anything but Bailey, he knew she wasn't just acting out.

"I didn't tell anybody," he said, split between wanting to see her and wanting to watch the tiny creature in his arms. "I didn't want him to tell anyone either. It's not personal, Cam, I just didn't want anyone to know."

Now her eyes sparked up towards him, brows furrowed. "Why not?"

"Because I never meant for it to last." Just as he said it, he realized how true it was. Throughout the past few months, he'd waited for the end, as if it was somehow inevitable. *It was, it was*, something in him said, but he heard it through a tunnel, not as a crystal clear sound singing in his head.

Confused, Bailey opened his mouth to say something, maybe add something that would calm the unnerving heaviness in his chest. His eyes met Cam's, her

clear blue gaze softening a little as if she knew Bailey had just been thrown off his game.

“Honey...” Cam’s eyes left Bailey and focused on Rudy, who looked like he was trying to stay quiet and immobile, so that no one would draw him into the conversation which had just turned a notch too deep and meaningful. “Why don’t you go and show off our baby girl?”

Bouncing on his feet, Rudy nodded. “Yes.” He circled the bed, smiling awkwardly at Bailey while he took the baby from his outstretched arms. “I’ll go do that.”

Bailey watched him go, watched the white hospital walls peek through the open door before it closed behind Rudy and the room was left in humming quietness. Still staring at the door, Bailey felt Cam’s hand circle his, gently pulling his thoughts back together. “Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

Bailey did. He started from the night, months ago, when they’d all been to the restaurant, and Jenny had been the queen of the evening, and somewhere during the night Bailey had found himself by the bar with Caden, bickering about something so meaningless he could no longer even remember what it was. He told her about the drinks and the shots and waking up in Caden’s bed in the morning and *hating* himself for falling into the same trap every other guy had fallen into. From there on, his speech meandered as single moments and small things came to mind, and he had to spit them out the second he thought of them. Small signs of thoughtfulness, like the documentary marathon in the middle of the night or fried eggs in the morning or that single time Caden had brought him breakfast in bed when no one else had ever done that. He didn’t tell Cam about the way Caden used to sneak out of bed quietly, so that he wouldn’t wake Bailey, but he always did, or about those few times he’d been awake while Caden thought he was asleep, and the man had kissed his temple and forehead and closed eyelids. It was mushy and a treacly cliché, but it was his. He didn’t want to share that with anyone.

Cam listened, seemingly entertained and pleased by the secrets shared with her. She didn’t interrupt, didn’t comment though Bailey could see she wanted to, and for once Bailey could say without a shred of disappointment that he’d been wrong. Cam didn’t look at him any differently. She didn’t cringe at the thought of Bailey’s actions, she didn’t look at him like he’d gone insane. She didn’t laugh and judge him, and Bailey felt so bad that he’d ever thought she might. She just sat there, hand still held around Bailey’s, while he vomited up roughly ninety percent of what had happened during the past few months.

“Oh... and it was Caden who decorated my head with popcorn.” He nodded when Cam looked at him with surprise. “He made some for himself and then he... yeah, it was him.”

A clever grin formed on Cam's lips. “Kinky.”

“Oh, shut up.” Bailey sighed deeply and leaned into her, as he'd managed to fit himself next to Cam on the narrow hospital bed. “That was the time I was sick,” he said thoughtfully.

“I remember.”

Nodding again, Bailey turned their hands around and held Cam's in his. “He brought me tea and oranges and watched TV with me. I don't know how long he stayed. I fell asleep at some point, and by the time I woke up, he was gone.” Running his fingers along Cam's knuckles, Bailey smiled. “He'd cleaned up before he left. You know... the dishes and stuff like that.”

“He probably knew you'd do it yourself, even if you had to crawl to get to the kitchen.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay... so let's review.” Cam patted Bailey's hand and sat up straight, suddenly looking all business. “The drunkenness and regrets of the first time aside... you two just happened to bond over a mutually satisfactory sexual relationship. There's nothing wrong with that.”

Bailey looked at her like she was crazy. “This is Caden we're talking about.”

“Yeah. So?” She stared back and sighed after a moment. “Okay... you and Caden? Ew. But on a larger scale; job well done.” She patted Bailey's hand again and smiled approvingly. Bailey was baffled.

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about you, diving headfirst into a relationship that had nothing to do with compatibility or being with someone because they look good on paper.” Cam cocked her eyebrow when Bailey went to protest. “Don't *even* start telling me you were with Liam because the guy had an awesome personality. He was exactly the type of guy you always go for; mellow, bland, and boring. You could control and manipulate all you wanted, because either he didn't care, or he didn't have the balls to stand up to you.”

Startled, Bailey stared at his best friend. “I have never...” Clearing his throat, he went on, “...controlled or manipulated.”

“You have a square little world, Bailey, where you keep a tight ship. It’s not bad, really it isn’t, but if you’re with someone, shouldn’t they convince you to make at least some compromises? Liam never did. And I bet you would never have changed a single thing just to make him happy.”

This was not the kind of conversation Bailey had expected. First of all, he hadn’t thought Cam would pick this particular moment to scrutinize Bailey’s flaws in relationships, and he especially hadn’t thought Cam would root for Caden. Because it seemed awfully a lot like that’s what she was doing.

“You know how he is,” he mumbled defensively.

“Who? Liam?”

“No, *Caden*. He’s fickle and conceited and careless. I honestly cannot count all the times I’ve wanted to break something because of something he said or did.”

“Yes, and I suppose the sex was just so great, you dragged it on for this long.”

“No, that’s not why...” Bailey sighed tiredly. “I am not going to give you details no matter how much you push me.”

Shrugging, Cam folded her hands over her lap. “It was worth the shot.” She grinned softly. “But the sex was good, right?”

“No comments.”

Regardless of his silence, the heat spreading across his face told its own tale. Cam chuckled wickedly. “Dear lord... he made you blush... hats off to Caden.”

“Trust me, he does not need you complimenting his...” Bailey frowned, evading Cam’s eyes. “Assets.”

She burst out laughing.

A group of five entered the quiet, almost finished house. Caden eyed the room, the empty moving boxes and full paint canisters sprinkled around. No doubt they were all in need of sleep, but as if by mutual agreement they’d all come to Rudy’s house, perhaps to prepare for damage control.

“When’s the furniture coming?” Jeff asked as he picked up a paint brush from the floor. Absently Caden glanced over his shoulder, only partly

concentrating on Ethan's answer. He felt tired and defeated, which was ridiculous since he wasn't the one who'd been up all night, delivering a baby. Still, seeing the bare walls and the few pieces of furniture still waiting to be assembled squeezed against the walls was like a slap in the face.

By the kitchen island, he stilled and picked up the tool belt he'd left there. "I promised the house would be ready for the baby." He said it more to himself than to anyone else, but Jenny heard him, her steps slowing by the backdoor. "What?"

Glancing at her sideways, Caden shrugged. "Cam was worried they'd make their baby homeless, and I said we'd get the house ready by the time the baby was here."

Jenny smiled kindly. "I think we all said that to her at one point or the other."

Caden watched her for a moment, then glanced down at the belt and nodded. "Yeah." But he'd really meant it. Like, really, *really* meant it.

Jenny's eyes drifted to the door, and from the silence that quickly spread around them, Caden could tell Bailey had entered the room. He told his brain to work properly, to start going through things they should finish here, now, before going home, but it didn't take long for his heart to overrule his head. He had to see, just to get a glimpse, but once his eyes sought out Bailey, it was impossible to look away.

Bailey put two paint brushes on the upside-down plastic crate someone had placed next to the wall, then stepped back. He pushed his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, the long-sleeved tee tightening around his shoulders and chest, and Caden hated knowing that the body underneath that shirt wasn't bony and sharp to the touch, but lithe and soft in all the right places. His eyes lingered on the shallow valley between Bailey's collarbones, his mind whipping up memories of all the times he'd touched that spot and kissed it, and how Bailey had gasped or laughed, arched his neck and wordlessly asked Caden to do it again.

Well... that was no more.

Swallowing the annoying knot of anguish tangled inside his throat, Caden turned back towards the island. He grabbed the tool belt, held it in his hands and fiddled with the clasps and loops, forcing his thoughts onto something other than how he could *not* destroy this any further.

“How many rooms need to be painted?” he asked, slowly raising his gaze from the belt. “Four, right?”

Ethan sighed and looked up at the staircase. “The nursery. Then the master bedroom. The hallway needs a second coating.”

“The guestroom needs one, too,” Bailey pitched in. He glanced at Caden warily, then looked away. Caden pushed aside the hollow pain that came with the avoidance. “Okay, so four rooms. That’s doable, right?”

Four pair of eyes turned to him, Jenny’s holding the most doubt. “What is?”

“We finish the rooms by the time they come home.”

Four pair of eyes exchanged glances. Ethan was the first to speak. “And then what? All of their stuff is still at their flat.”

“So we’ll move it here.”

Nodding slowly, Jeff gestured towards the staircase. “The furniture for the nursery doesn’t get here until Tuesday. I doubt they’ll keep Cam and the baby at the hospital for that long.”

Sighing, Caden dropped the tool belt on the island. “I’m loving the enthusiasm here.”

“So we get their stuff here, but the baby has nothing?”

“Okay... how about we call the store and ask if we can get the furniture quicker if we take care of the transportation ourselves? I could probably get a car from work for the weekend.”

Jenny frowned. “Probably?”

“Definitely.” Caden nodded, certain that he would have to grovel to get his boss to lend him a van, but that wasn’t an issue. The fact that the other four still looked at him like he was out of his mind was the issue. “Four rooms, their stuff, and the furniture for the nursery. We’ve got three days. It’s totally doable.”

Again the others exchanged glances, but this time it was Bailey who spoke. “I could take care of the packing,” he said, shrugging. “I know they’ve packed most of it already, but there’s still all the kitchenware and stuff like that. Clothes. Some books.”

Caden clasped his hands together. “That’s the spirit!” His exuberant shout earned him a few raised brows, all of which did nothing to smother his ascending optimism. “Bay takes care of packing, okay... I take care of the car.”

“It has to be a truck. A van’s too small for all of their stuff.”

“That’s cool. I’ve got the license. So what else?” Little by little the doubtful spirit evaporated, and eventually Caden wasn’t the only one seeing the potential in the situation. Unfortunately, the more high-spirited everybody got, the more things started piling on the list of things to do. The painting, the moving, the packing, furniture and assembling, and the logistics. After a while of staying back from the conversation, Bailey waved his hands, looking distraught. “Stop!”

And they all did.

The freckle-faced, strawberry-blond keeper of Caden’s heart rummaged through the messenger bag still strapped across his shoulder. He pulled out a pad and pushed past Ethan. “This needs to be planned out in detail.” He dropped the pad on the island and withdrew his calendar from the bag. “Okay... today is Thursday.”

Caden watched Bailey search for the correct date from the calendar, read through everything he’d written and then write something down on the pad. “Cam was supposed to call the vendor about the furniture today,” Bailey said, tapping a pen on the open calendar page. Why he had all this stuff written down on his personal calendar, Caden didn’t know, but right now he was just glad Bailey was so... Bailey.

“I’ll call them and ask about the delivery and all that.” Bailey glanced up, as if to ask if that was okay. Caden nodded, unable to keep himself from smiling. *That’s my Bay*, he wanted to say, but luckily he was still sane enough to shut up.

Jenny came to stand next to Bailey, pointing at something in the calendar. “We need to call Cam’s parents and see when we can pick up everything from the apartment. I could take care of that.”

One by one they all gathered around the island, and Bailey wrote down everything. Everything. He wrote down dates and specific times. Caden was half-expecting the man to tell them to calibrate their watches. But that was cool. It was all cool, because Bailey stood less than two feet from him without being forced to. He stood so close, Caden could feel the warmth of his body and smell the distinctive scent floating around Bailey. He stood so close, all Caden had to do was reach out his hand, and he could easily reach all the way around Bailey. But then Bailey looked at him, as if the man had guessed Caden’s thoughts, and

it was obvious things were still the same. Bailey still didn't want it. He still didn't believe. He still didn't trust. He still would not give Caden half a chance to show how good they could be if Bailey only let them.

It hurt. It really did. Caden wondered if this was what people called a broken heart.

Later, when Jenny and Jeff had left for Cam's parents', and Bailey was in the backyard with his pad and calendar and making a call to the vendor, Ethan sneaked up on Caden who was shamelessly spying on Bailey through the upstairs window.

Standing next to Caden, Ethan clasped his hands behind his back and gazed out of the window. "So..." he drawled. "Bay, huh? You've advanced onto pet names?"

Caden stepped back and glared at Ethan. "And that's your business how, exactly?"

"Oh, it isn't. I was just wondering if you two made up already."

"Does it look like we made up?"

Shaking his head, Ethan turned away from the window. "I suppose not." The usual glint of a smile in his eyes was gone when he looked at Caden. There was worry there instead. Maybe sympathy. Hopefully not pity, though. "Give him time. Maybe he just needs to figure things out for himself."

Caden shook his head and looked out on the backyard where Bailey sat under a large maple tree, phone still held between his ear and shoulder while he wrote something in his calendar. Soon he ended the call, quickly scribbled something on the pad before standing up and gathering his belongings from the ground. He wiped grass from his jeans and happened to look up, his movements in slow motion when he saw Caden watching. A smile would've made Caden's life so much better. Even one of those snarky grins would've been better than the blank look. Like there was nothing.

Bailey looked away and quickly walked inside. Caden stood there watching, the sense of helplessness making itself known once again.

It was an impossible task to get everything done in time. Still, they tried.

Caden managed to get a truck for the weekend, and Bailey used all of his charming skills to woo the sales-woman at the store, so they could get the

furniture two days early. He and Jenny went to Cam and Rudy's apartment and packed everything that wasn't assembled or nailed to the walls. Then he stood back and watched Caden, Jeff, and Ethan carry everything to the truck. No, he would not break his back when there were men much stronger than him to do the heavy lifting. He did give advice, which seemed to annoy the ever-living poo out of the guys. Except for Caden. Caden didn't seem annoyed. He seemed ecstatic. He smiled when the others grimaced. He chuckled when the others cursed. He was starting to get to a point of delirium where Bailey was afraid to say a word in case Caden choked on his own laughter.

During the next few days, Bailey learned that he had been wrong thinking he could move on as if nothing had ever happened between him and Caden. Bailey acknowledged the fact that at times his hormones ruled over common sense, but how was he supposed to know that Caden handling a gigantic truck with no problem whatsoever would be so sexy. In Bailey's book it gave a whole new definition to sexiness. Bulging biceps and flexing shoulders as Caden moved the boxes around didn't exactly hurt his accelerating sex appeal, and more than once Bailey was forced to look elsewhere and take a few deep breaths to calm his racing body.

Sexiness aside, Bailey couldn't help but to be drawn closer when the passion which Caden worked with came to the front time after time. It was obvious he would get things done by himself if he had to, and Bailey had never seen anyone work as hard as Caden worked during those few short days. He never once complained, never snapped at anyone though their brilliant plans didn't always go the way they'd thought. He just went on, determinedly and stubbornly, always being the last to leave and the first to arrive. A few times, Bailey wondered if Caden went home at all. On Sunday he got his answer.

He expected it to be a rather easy day, since they'd already moved everything and were now left with assembling the furniture and putting everything in the correct places. Bailey got up early, went through his morning rituals quickly and left for the house. Out of a whim, he asked the cabdriver to take a different route, and he wasn't surprised to see that Caden's car wasn't parked on the street in front of his apartment.

Glancing at the clock on his phone, Bailey cringed at the idea of getting up at the crack of dawn.

After another quick detour Bailey arrived at the house a little before nine. Caden's car was parked on the driveway, and the downstairs windows were

pushed open. Bailey walked up to the door and pushed it open, listening for any possible sounds, but it took a few seconds and several steps further inside to hear anyone's presence.

Mumbling something to himself, Caden sat on the floor in the living room, a half-assembled drawer turned on its side in front of him. Bailey halted by the arched doorway, not sure how to make his presence known, but seconds later Caden reached for a screwdriver from the floor next to him and turned his head just enough to notice Bailey. It was as if time froze; another cliché, but that's how Bailey felt. He didn't move, couldn't, and Caden was still as well, hand still stretched towards the screwdriver.

Eventually Bailey's limbs cooperated again, and he stepped away from the door. "I brought coffee," he said, holding up the large take-away cup he carried along.

Caden's brows rose slightly. "For me?"

Bailey nodded and held the cup out to Caden when he reached the man. "I figured you get up so early, your caffeine level lacks by nine a.m." He wouldn't call it a peace offering, since they weren't fighting, but he could see something shift in Caden's eyes when the man took the cup. Stepping back, Bailey headed into the open kitchen. "I brought some snacks too."

Seconds later Caden had followed him into the kitchen where Bailey had emptied his bag. He hadn't hesitated at the shop, but now he felt a little exposed when Caden fiddled with the packet of cookies. Everything else he'd bought could be meant for anyone, but the cookies were meant for Caden. Why Bailey still cared was a mystery. And then again it wasn't.

"Have you been here all night?" he asked and looked up, only to find Caden staring down at the unopened packet. Caden shook his head and glanced around. "I got here a little after four."

"And when did you leave?"

"Somewhere around midnight."

Bailey nodded, tempted to say Caden should get some rest too, but it wasn't his place to give advice. Instead he put his bag on the island and gestured towards the boxes by the wall. "I was thinking I'd empty the boxes before everybody else gets here." It was only kitchenware, and everything else was carried to the correct rooms. All they needed now was to assemble the shelves and drawers where they'd hide everything.

Caden nodded, grabbed the package of cookies and his coffee and nodded towards the backyard. "I'm gonna have a cig before I finish with the drawer." He took a step, gaze held low, before he glanced at Bailey, gesturing with his hands. "Thanks for these."

"You're welcome." Bailey aimed for a smile, but his lips felt numb, and he didn't know what actually transformed on his face. Caden didn't smile. He simply looked back, something hollow and grave dwelling in his eyes, and Bailey hated thinking he'd put it there.

The words were right on the tip of his tongue, burning to get out. If he could speak, he would. He'd say he was sorry, say he'd been wrong. He'd tell about the herd of butterfly wings fluttering in the bottom of his stomach every time Caden had wrapped his arms around Bailey and held him close. He'd confess that he had been scared, that he still was—whisper it so quietly it had no chance to grow and cover everything that was safe. He'd ask if maybe Caden still wanted to have something that would meander out of the bedroom and conquer every inch of space. He'd ask if maybe Caden still wanted to walk on the street with him and hold his hand. He would. Except that he never did.

Caden turned around and reached the door with a few long steps. He was out on the porch so quickly, Bailey didn't get a word out. He stood by the island and watched Caden skip down the stairs, his steps light and effortless. His shoulders, strong and solid beneath the worn blue of his shirt, tensed as he lit a cigarette, and Bailey watched as the smoke clouded in the air. He remembered that smell, the scent of freshly smoked cigarette, and how it had tasted in Caden's kisses. He remembered so many things he'd never even thought about before, and each of those things reminded him of how much he really missed Caden.

Bailey had emptied the first of the seven boxes on the counter when Caden came back inside. The man didn't say a word, just went back to the drawer. Bailey held his tongue as well. He stared down at the piled plates and squeezed the edge of the box. He listened to Caden's steps, found comfort in those sounds. Then they stopped. It was quiet again.

"There's the park." Cam pointed a finger towards the park they'd just passed, giving details of the layout. Too bad her daughter wasn't listening. The baby was fast asleep in the seat next to Cam, but that didn't stop her mother from continuing to explain their surroundings.

Caden yawned and stretched his neck, flexing his fingers around the steering wheel. He would most definitely go to bed early tonight.

A sigh from the backseat caught Caden's attention. "I don't know if this is a good idea," Cam said, frowning while she gazed outside. "Maybe it would be better if she saw the house once it was actually done. I don't want her to have bad memories."

From the passenger's seat Rudy glanced at Caden, smirking slightly. "Don't worry, honey." He glanced over his shoulder. "There will be no bad memories in that house." Caden had no idea how Rudy had managed to keep the last burst of activity a secret, but Cam was still blissfully unaware of the surprise waiting at the end of their drive.

"Let's hope so."

Ten minutes later Rudy carried the baby up the driveway while Cam looked around, sighing dreamily while she looked at the flowerbeds she'd planted weeks ago. "Did you guys water these? They look great."

Caden nodded, following her to the door. "We thought we'd keep things in check while you were taking care of the kid."

Smiling tenderly, Cam wrapped her arm around Caden's waist and squeezed against his side. "Thank you. You guys have helped us so much."

You have no idea.

Caden wrapped his arm around Cam's shoulders. "That's what friends are for."

"When the house is ready, and we've settled in, I'll cook you guys a dinner and wine and dine you all night long." Cam nodded firmly, the awful tinge of sadness vanishing from her eyes. She smiled at Rudy when he pushed the door open. Three steps later, her smile turned into rounded lips and wide eyes as she took in the painted walls and the furnished rooms.

"What...?" Frowning confusedly, Cam turned around. Her eyes bounced from one wall to the next, up to the staircase and back to the door. "This... what... I..."

Rudy walked up to her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, kissing her gently on the forehead. "Welcome home, Mami." He led her into the living room where they could see Ethan and Jeff busying themselves out on the porch with the barbeque, and Bailey and Jenny working in the kitchen. If the blinking

and stuttering was anything to go by, Cam was still in shock. She kept opening and closing her mouth, a million things catching her attention as her gaze wouldn't settle for a single second.

"How did you...?" She shook her head, helplessly looking at Caden. "Did you do this?"

"We all did."

Looking at Rudy, she frowned. "Did you know about this?" She slapped him halfheartedly when he nodded. "And you didn't tell me!" And then came the waterworks. It started so suddenly, Caden was worried for a second, but by the time Rudy hugged his wife and held her and their baby to his chest, Cam's cries started sounding like giggling.

Jeff appeared at the door. "Is she laughing or crying?"

"A little bit of both, I think." Rudy kissed her on the top of her head, murmuring something so quietly even Caden couldn't hear, though he stood right next to them. Cam looked up, tears still glistening in her eyes, and she reached up and kissed Rudy. They kissed all the time, even in public, in ways that should definitely be left behind closed doors, but they were all used to it by now, and it never once bothered anyone. It bothered Caden now.

Burning with envy, he turned away and reminded himself how other people's happiness took nothing away from him. Still, wanting what he couldn't have gave common sense a run for its money. Maybe that was why he was relieved when Cam finally stepped back and swirled around the room. She hugged them all, squeezed incredibly hard and wouldn't stop thanking everybody. Tears still ran down her cheeks, but at least they all knew they were tears of joy.

"I want a tour!" she announced and dragged Caden along. She seemed to see everything with new eyes, like she had never seen the house before. The tour was a continuous chant of "oh my gods" and "awws", and Caden was sure there wasn't a female in this world who'd kissed him as much as Cam had by the time they returned to the living room. On the cheek, of course. Otherwise Rudy might've smacked him harder than anyone on the whole planet.

It was a bittersweet evening. Caden loved his friends, every single one of them, and he loved those evenings when they'd get together and do nothing but talk and eat and laugh. To him, there was an inkling of good-bye in the air that night. As the sun set, and the sky darkened, the newest addition to their group

was passed from one set of arms to the next, but it wasn't until Bailey folded his arms beneath her and held her close that Caden's thoughts splintered and broke.

Watching Bailey sit there, surrounded by their friends, with that tiny bundle of joy in his arms, and the most gorgeous smile on his face, made Caden want so many things he could not have. He could easily imagine himself building a home of good memories and happy thoughts, side by side with Bailey. Watching Bailey now made Caden realize he had imagined that, planned ahead and thought of times and dates. He'd thought about what to get Bailey for his birthday, about holidays and vacations. He'd thought about it all because he'd thought he would get it. He'd thought he could have it. Have it and keep it. How easily had that happened?

Seconds ticked by so quickly Caden couldn't memorize everything he wanted. Caden could see Bailey was stalling, but he couldn't tell why. Caden prolonged the evening, knowing well it would only add to the torture later, but he couldn't make himself leave. There would be no more gatherings around paint canisters or garden planning. He wouldn't get to see Bailey every day any longer, because he no longer had a reason to. So he drank in Bailey's presence now, his laughs and smiles and gentle voice. He wished he could steal a second and bottle it, store it somewhere and go back to it whenever he wanted. He wished for the right words now when he still had the chance, but not a single one came out. So he watched and listened, hating the moment Bailey stood up and said he had to go.

A few weeks ago Caden would've come up with an excuse and offered a ride. And Bailey would've tossed his head and accepted. And a little while later they would've been twined together from head to toe. But no more. Now Caden stood back and watched Bailey leave. He watched Bailey hug everybody good-bye, everybody but him. Still by the couch, Caden watched Bailey reach the door and glance over his shoulder. The man gave a lifeless wave and a fraction of a smile, saying "goodnight", and Caden nodded, surely speaking though later he couldn't remember if he actually had. And then Bailey was gone. He closed the door, and Caden no longer saw him. Just like that.

The house which had radiated happiness only moments ago was quiet now. Caden could feel cautious glances and looks of "I'm sorry" aimed at him, but he didn't meet a single one. Turning on his heels, he walked over to the porch and skipped down the stairs, like a coward running from the attention. It wasn't that he couldn't take it. He just didn't want to.

Minutes later he sat on the lowest step on the stairs when Cam joined him. She didn't ask if he wanted company, didn't ask if maybe Caden wanted to be alone. She just sat next to him and wrapped her arm around his shoulders, squeezing tightly. "It'll get better. I promise. Just give him a little time."

Caden nodded.

He just couldn't believe it.

Bailey had thought it would be easier now that he didn't have to see Caden. He'd been wrong.

Sometimes he woke up in the middle of the night, hand outstretched across the sheets, and it always took him a few seconds to remember that there was no one there. Then he lay awake and stared up at the ceiling or hugged his pillow, mind in spasms over the million things he could've done for things to be different now. He wondered if any of the men Caden had been with had felt like Bailey felt now, like a piece had been taken away, and a part of his life was now empty.

Days became monotonous and bland. Suddenly he had too much time on his hands, and he didn't know what to do with it. He couldn't tell for sure whether he still did everything he'd done before the house-project had begun, because back then he'd always had something to do, whereas now it felt like time stood still, and he had nothing to do. Cam enjoyed her new home so much, she came up with all sorts of reasons to invite people over, and Bailey loved going, loved spending time with her and their friends. The downside of things was seeing Caden. Seeing Caden was painful as hell.

Bailey didn't know what he'd hoped would happen, but as time went by, he started missing something. Something he wasn't getting. Going back to the way things had been was out of the question, but Bailey hadn't expected things to change like this. Caden had gone from hot-tempered to polite in a matter of days, and nothing confused Bailey more than the lack of fire in Caden's presence. Caden was calm and collected while Bailey was on the verge of a temper tantrum every other minute. He felt like no one else noticed Caden's weirdness while they all walked on eggshells around Bailey.

Nearly two months passed with bleak, empty days and hours Bailey was sure he wouldn't miss later. He found his rhythm, the routines he'd lost and

then missed, and life finally settled into a normality he was genuinely grateful for. He rarely woke up feeling lonely anymore. Just sometimes, maybe once or twice a week. He stopped sporting the old, dark blue T-shirt Caden had forgotten once; now Bailey only slept in it sometimes, but that was just because it was loose and soft, comfortable. Comforting, if it was one of those bad days.

All in all, his life was starting to look a little like the life he'd had before Caden. And then, one night, everything just changed.

It didn't come as a surprise, not really. Bailey had been feeling moody all week, and he'd even been told to stop menstruating—another one of Cam's funny little jokes. It was the upcoming party on Saturday that left him nervous. The party was supposed to be a secret, though Bailey was convinced everybody knew. Even Caden, who was the only person who absolutely shouldn't have known. After all, what were surprise birthday parties without the surprise? The fact that Caden's birthday was actually on Friday didn't change the way things would play out. Cam just thought he wouldn't figure out the surprise if the party was held on Saturday.

Bailey made a list, yet again, of all the things he could possibly buy Caden for his birthday. A year ago this hadn't been a problem, but now, with everything that had happened, Bailey just didn't know. Impersonal presents really wouldn't do once you knew someone very personally, but everything even remotely decent felt too intimate, like a reminder of small things Bailey knew, but no one else did. To be honest, he didn't want to go. He didn't want to sit there and offer congratulations, act nice and friendly while all he really wanted to do was walk up to Caden, hug him and just stay there.

It had been nearly two months without those hugs. It was torture.

On Friday, after doing his laundry and planning next week's grocery list, Bailey fixed a quick dinner and ate it while still fiddling with his list. It bothered him that he didn't know what Caden actually wanted. If they'd been friends, he could've asked, but as they were now, there was no such thing as asking for anything. The only thing Caden had ever mentioned wanting was a date, but it was safe to say that ship had sailed. Besides, how conceited was it to offer yourself up on a date as a present? It was something Caden might've done, but not Bailey. *Never* Bailey.

Bailey sketched random patterns on the side of his notepad while emptying his plate, the number "29" appearing in different shapes and forms around and over the carefully written list, he'd made during the week. Caden's name still

peeked out from under the letters and numbers, but it was nearly impossible to make sense of the list. Bailey stared down at the page, smoothing his fingers over the number, then over Caden's name, suddenly saddened by how complicated everything was now.

His square little world was filled with mazes now.

On a whim he wrote "happy birthday" on top of the mess he'd managed to create on the page, took a picture and hit 'send' before he had a chance to change his mind. Then he stared down at his phone, shocked and oddly chipper. The cheer faded when there was no answer within the next twenty minutes. Half an hour later, Bailey regretted acting so juvenile. At nine in the evening, he'd reorganized his cleaned, folded clothes in his closet and decided he would get Caden a pair of socks.

At ten-o-seven Bailey's heart fell to his stomach when his phone buzzed on the side of his nightstand, a new message creating an absurdly loud sound in the otherwise quiet apartment. It took him a moment to actually gather up enough courage to check his phone, and even if he was ninety-nine point nine percent sure it was from Caden, he still feared it wasn't.

It was.

It was Caden saying thank you and mentioning that Bailey's text was on the top three of the things that salvaged Caden's evening from being a total let-down.

Staring down at his phone, Bailey was itching to ask what the other two were. He didn't ask. For a long time he didn't do anything, because he didn't know if there was a code for this type of messaging. Usually Bailey would've either ignored answering altogether or simply texted something back about hoping the night would end on a good note. Texting was not Bailey's forte. Had it been anyone else, Bailey would've called. Now he cradled his phone in his hands and sat on the bed, thinking hard about what to write back.

Eventually he just commented that, being the birthday boy, Caden could just chuck off whatever didn't entertain him and go do something else. As soon as he sent it, he realized how lame it was and wished he would've come up with something wittier.

At ten-twenty-three Caden texted back, saying he didn't know how to chuck off Ethan, and that he was currently beating Jeff's ass at pool, so he'd at least have to see that through.

The tone of the messages was light and mellow, and Bailey didn't feel forced to write anything back, but still he clung on to his phone, hoping he could come up with something to say. He couldn't. There were a million things he wanted to say, but none of those fit into text messages. He would've needed hours and face-to-face contact and a chance to explain all those places where he'd done wrong.

A new message at ten-fifty.

Should've checked out. I lost.

Bailey smiled, chuckled even. Quickly he typed back, then stared at the screen once he'd sent the message.

There's always next time. Ever heard of trying again?

It had no hidden message. Absolutely not. Still, Bailey's heart threatened to rampage through his chest when another message came through merely seconds later.

How many chances does a guy get?

Okay, so they were definitely no longer talking about pool.

Bailey placed his phone on the nightstand and left the bedroom. Putting distance between him and the device didn't exactly help, but he could easily imagine being away from the danger zone once he no longer saw his phone. Too bad he could still hear it.

A continuous, uneven buzzing told him messages were a thing of the past, and someone was seriously trying to reach him this time. Cautiously, he returned to the bedroom, fiddling with the hem of his flannel pajama top. Caden's name flashed on the screen, over and over and over again, and it was only the fear of missing the call that forced Bailey to answer.

"Hello?"

"Hey." The smile was so evident in Caden's voice, Bailey had to bite his lip not to sigh. "So I took your advice."

"You chucked off Ethan?"

"Yep. Way to spoil the mood."

Lowering himself to the corner of the bed, Bailey searched for clever words. "He'll survive." That was definitely not clever.

"What were the other two things?" Bailey asked quickly.

“Oh... a call from my sister. She's coming over next week. And Cam sent a picture of Molly. I swear, she's the only person in the world who can make drool bubbles look good.”

Humming his agreement, Bailey scooted further back on the bed. “She's cute.”

“A ten out of ten.”

“Mmm.”

And then it was quiet.

It was so quiet, all Bailey could hear were the sounds of traffic surrounding Caden, puncturing the quietness. From the corner of his eye he saw the faded blue shirt peek from under his pillow. He had worn it twice this week, unable to even get it out of the bed.

Wasn't that some sort of form of co-dependency or something?

Caden cleared his throat, the sound yanking Bailey back to reality. “So how's your day been?”

“Laundry.” Bailey wanted to kick himself in the head, but Caden's throaty chuckle made the desire lessen. “Right... it's Friday.” Why did it warm Bailey's heart that Caden still remembered?

“How's everything? I haven't seen you in a while.”

“Everything's... the same, I guess.” Again Bailey's eyes were diverted to the shirt. “You?”

“The same, yeah. Kitty sneaked out a couple of weeks ago, but we found her pretty quickly. No harm done.”

Bailey grimaced. “Bummer.”

Caden's laughter burrowed right through Bailey's chest. “I don't know how you can *not* like her.”

“Told you it's the other way around.”

“Yeah... so you did.”

Cue silence.

The shirt might as well have been neon green with the power it held over Bailey. He couldn't get his eyes off of it, like it was a dirty secret he hadn't told anyone, and now it was time. Go cold turkey. That's what he should've done a long time ago.

Caden coughed awkwardly. "So..."

"You forgot a shirt." Bailey screwed his eyes shut and bit his tongue, freaking out and liberated at the same time.

"What shirt?"

"Just a T-shirt. Blue. It's got some weird red print on the front."

"Oh... Yeah, I've been wondering where I left it."

"Now you know."

"Yeah." Traffic and steps and people, but no sound from Caden. Not until he laughed briefly. "You could've just left it at Cam's."

"Yeah, I could've." Needless to say he never had. Now the shirt was in his hands, the softness of the old fabric so comforting against his aching skin. "I still sleep in it sometimes," he said quietly, pained by the confession.

Caden didn't say a word. Maybe he hadn't heard Bailey. Or maybe he had, and he thought Bailey was insane. Like, stalker-material insane.

Bailey heard a door close, then heavy thumps before the line went quiet. And then Caden's quietly spoken voice, such heaviness blending into one single word. "Bailey."

"Yeah?"

"Open the door."

Bailey's eyes bounced to the door visible through his dark apartment. He grasped on to the shirt, afraid to move.

Caden breathed deep. "Please, let me in."

Bailey imagined Caden on the other side of the door, his hand maybe pressed against the door like he was begging to get inside.

Every step seemed seconds long, and Bailey still hesitated when he got to the door. He pulled it open, immediately bathed in warmth when he saw Caden standing there. Stepping back, he let Caden inside and finally disconnected the call and closed the door, unable to say a word, while his heart beat so loudly Caden had to hear it too.

"Hold on..." Caden remained in the hall while Bailey fetched the shirt from where he'd left it lying on the bed. Looking up at Caden was still hard, but Bailey managed as he passed the shirt over to the man.

"I should've washed it," he said, as soon as he remembered he hadn't. Caden fisted his hand around the shirt, watching Bailey peculiarly under his dark brows before he brought the shirt up to his face and breathed deep. It wasn't a sniff, not like he was making sure it wasn't just a dirty rag. He breathed in, like he was trying to capture even the faintest whiffs of whatever scents were attached to the fabric, and all the while his gaze was hooked on Bailey.

The look in his eyes, intensity and something Bailey couldn't quite name, went straight to Bailey's knees, forcing him to lean his side against the wall as he hugged his arms around his body.

Caden lowered his hand, eyes still on Bailey when he took a step. "I'm glad you didn't." He moved forward like he had every right to, like someone had just given him a permission to come closer and move into Bailey's personal space. He didn't. He had *no* right, and still Bailey couldn't tell him not to.

Intensely and hard, Caden's mouth crashed on Bailey's and easily stole the surprised breath gushing from Bailey's mouth. In his stomach those butterfly wings danced frantically but higher, much, much higher, dizziness took over and took away any chance of doing anything else than holding on and surviving. That's what it felt like; like fighting for each stolen breath in between the attacks against his lips. It wasn't even passionate in a sense that left Bailey wobbly and dizzy. It was simply infuriated and frantic, painful at times where teeth scratched lips, and no one cared enough to ease off. And then it ended. Just like that.

Caden stepped back, leaving Bailey heaving shaky breaths, still by the wall. "You still sleep in it?" Caden asked, as if he couldn't understand. He shook his head, glanced down to the shirt still clutched in his hand. "You still *sleep in it*?!"

"Just sometimes." Bailey exhaled slowly and stood up straight. He wanted to smooth his hand along Caden's cheek, wipe away the confusion and hurt and maybe replace it with understanding and joy. He didn't, though. He just stood there and watched. "Just sometimes, when I miss you really badly." Where did all this boldness come from?

Caden watched him as if in awe, mouth left open and a ridiculous little chuckle escaping his throat. "Just sometimes when..." He shook his head and stepped back. "I'm not gonna do this."

"What do you mean?"

“You’re the one who didn’t want anything more than a casual fuck a couple of times a week.” Caden thrust the wrinkled shirt at Bailey. “You’re the one who didn’t believe in this enough to actually give it a chance. You’re the one who didn’t trust in *me*. And now you’re telling me that *you* sleep in my shirt sometimes?!”

Bailey shrugged awkwardly. “Yeah.”

Caden chuckled, bewildered. “You’re unbelievable.” He shook his head and ran a hand through his short hair, the shirt still hanging from his fingers.

Bailey wetted his dry lips, searching for words. “I was wrong.” He shook his head. “No, I wasn’t wrong... I lied. Okay? I... I was scared, just like you said, and I lied. And I’m sorry.”

Watching Caden’s downcast face, the tired disbelief in every shake of his head, compelled Bailey to bridge the distance. With each hesitant step he got a little closer, still not sure where all this would end. “I never meant to hurt you. I just didn’t want to get myself hurt either.”

“And you were so sure that’s what would happen, is that it?”

“Caden... I wasn’t even enough for Liam. How could I ever be enough for you?” He shook his head when Caden went to protest. “I’m not that much fun, you know. I whine and nag about everything, and I don’t think I can ever really stop doing that. I will drive you insane, and I didn’t want that to happen when we were together, because I couldn’t stand the idea of losing you.”

“I have known you for years. You think I don’t know you nag? Bailey, I *know* you.”

Nodding, Bailey shuffled in front of Caden. “I know. I just didn’t realize it until... until it was too late.” Still hesitant, he brought up his hand and gave into the urge to touch. Gently, he wiped the tips of his fingers along the side of Caden’s face, trying to mend every crease of discomfort he’d put there before. “I thought I couldn’t keep you, so I’d rather not have you at all. It’s not that I didn’t trust you. I just didn’t trust myself.” Inching closer, he leaned up and placed a single kiss on Caden’s lips. “Please forgive me.”

Searching through Caden’s face, Bailey waited with his heart drumming in his chest as it took seconds before Caden finally looked at him. Behind the hurt was something so much stronger; Bailey wondered how he hadn’t noticed it there before.

“I don’t wanna hide this anymore. I don’t want to do that.”

“You don’t have to. I promise.” Yes, it still scared him, but it was okay now. Being scared was suddenly the easiest thing in the world when Caden looked at him like he was something magnificent.

Hands stroking his sides, Caden’s forehead leaned against his. It felt good. It felt like coming home. Smiling tentatively, Bailey leaned both of his hands against Caden’s chest. “So... how many chances does a guy get?”

Caden narrowed his eyes, hands creeping to the sides of Bailey’s hips. “Maybe we should go one chance at a time. How about that?”

“Yeah... I think we should do that.”

Turned out people did actually stand in embraces for minutes on end, but Bailey didn’t mind. Caden didn’t seem to mind either. A small laugh resonated beneath Bailey’s palms. “You still wear it sometimes?”

“Okay... can we move past that, please?”

“No, see, that’s a perfect example of how badly you really need me.”

Bailey pulled back, cocking his eyebrow. “Don’t get cocky.”

“Me? Never.” Caden smiled, for the first time in weeks showing off that brilliant smile of his that Bailey had once hated, but which he now adored. “You know me; humility is my middle name.” Caden brought up his hand, cupped it under Bailey’s chin and kissed him. Kissed him with all he had. Hard and sweet and demanding and gentle. A kiss like that could turn Bailey’s knees into jelly. A kiss like that often enough did.

“What is it with you?” Caden murmured. “You rock both cotton and flannel.” He tugged on the hem of Bailey’s pajama. “Sexy as hell.”

“You’re weird.” Secretly pleased... oh who was he kidding? Pleased, period, Bailey smiled into another kiss.

“Weird and charming.” Caden nodded knowingly. “Just admit it. You *did* think I was charming.”

Bailey cocked his chin, tossing his head. “My lips are sealed.”

Smirking smugly, Caden played with the waistband of Bailey’s flannel bottoms. “We’ll see about that.”

Later that night Bailey received a private lesson on all things related to love. He learned that making love doesn’t mean sappy words and cuddly kisses, that it can be the simplicity of fingertips running over bare shoulders or shaky lips.

He learned that declarations don't always need words, that a caress over his cheek with a shaky hand can say "I love you" just as much as any words can. He learned that getting his hands bound to the bedpost with joking comments and throaty commands wasn't weird, or anything he should feel ashamed of. Just like being pulled off the bed and making a mess of the floor like they'd done on the bed didn't degrade who he was. It was just an extension of the way they were. Just another form of love only between the two of them, never between anyone else.

Much later, when night had become day, he was taught how love does not mean compatibility or perfect track records. He now knew that even the most inexperienced could be the greatest master, and how anyone could find safety in the most absurd places. That he learned, when his breathing finally settled and the black bindings were still wrapped around him where Caden had put them hours earlier. It wasn't black nylon that anchored him; it was Caden's warmth and solid arms around him. The breath against his shoulder and the few random, tired kisses against his skin were the best kind of love he could think of. The only right kind for him.

Epilogue

The mellow feel of weightlessness beneath him gave Caden a sense of being underwater or way up high where gravity no longer applied. Still, he kept his head together and his focus on more important things than whether or not he really was in outer space. "Are you comfortable?"

Next to him Bailey hummed contently, eyes closed and face turned upwards, where branches and leaves filtered out most of the sunrays. His sunglasses were on the grass by the tree, their shoes kicked away on the ground next to the hammock, and somewhere not so far away was Bailey's glass of ice water. It was probably warm by now, but Caden didn't think he'd need to worry about getting the man another one anytime soon. Bailey seemed content being where he was without anything to drink.

A month had passed. One month. It was a relatively short amount of time, but Caden liked the speed with which they'd progressed. He could now kiss Bailey in public without causing chaos, and he never had to worry whether he could take Bailey's hand and hold it in his own. There were still things Bailey didn't say out loud, but he had ways of showing what he couldn't vocalize. They now lounged in a giant hammock in Rudy and Cam's backyard, their whole group present after one of their Sunday dinners.

It had been a good summer. Caden's favorite.

Bailey shifted, rocking the hammock gently while he nudged his face against Caden's chest. It was a common trait of his, one Caden loved and would never get enough of. He liked to think that Bailey wanted to rub Caden's scent all over him, but Bailey said he did it because Caden's chest hair felt nice through the shirt. Caden called it bull. It had to be the scent.

Ethan walked by, rolling his eyes at the tangle of limbs in the hammock. "You two are disgusting."

"Don't be jealous," Caden teased and closed his eyes while nuzzling his nose against Bailey's hair. It smelled sweet and soft and sugary, like what all the candy in a candy shop would taste like. "We just got lucky."

"Very lucky." Cam's voice was colored with joy, and she stayed on the porch, Rudy still inside with the baby. "And cute."

"Oh, so cute," Jenny said teasingly.

Bailey grunted, his brows drawn into a frown. "You people are so juvenile." The furrow between his brows smoothed when Caden stroked his thumb over it. Discontent on Bailey's face was not what Caden liked to see, therefore he did his best to make it go away. He succeeded ninety percent of the time. Sometimes it took a little more work than expected, but Caden never complained. They'd found balance in how to keep both parties happy; both had their ways to please and to serve. Caden did it by making sure Bailey's days were as trouble-free as possible, and Bailey did it by... night. Enough said. Beneath that holier-than-thou front was a firecracker. Another thing Caden loved about his man.

"So how about that movie?" Cam asked. Sounds of chairs scratching the porch's floor filled the air, but the two men on the hammock didn't move. "We'll be right there," Caden said, arms still wrapped around Bailey's shoulders.

"Okay, people." Jenny rushed the others indoors. "Let's give these lovebirds some privacy."

Bailey grimaced at the comment but didn't say anything. With his eyes closed, he remained in Caden's embrace and didn't seem to be in a hurry to follow the others inside. Caden sensed reluctance, like Bailey was staying behind on purpose.

Caden brought up his hand and stroked his fingers through Bailey's hair. "Is something wrong?" he asked quietly. He'd sensed something was off for days, but he hadn't dared to ask about it. Now, he felt it was time to face the problem, whatever it was. "You've been really quiet for a while now."

Bailey sighed. "I talked with my mother a couple of days ago." His fingers fiddled with the front of Caden's shirt. "I told her about you."

Joy bloomed in Caden's chest, until he heard the hesitance in Bailey's voice. "Is that not a good thing?"

Bailey pulled away, rocking the hammock from side to side while he settled on the very edge. "I never told her about Liam." He glanced up, smiling awkwardly. "Don't look so shocked."

Caden frowned. "You were with him for nearly two years, and you didn't tell your own mother about him? Why?"

Shrugging, Bailey looked away. "My family's happy for me when good things happen, and they support me. We're just not close like you are with your family." He looked up, squinting against the sunlight. Dozens and dozens of freckles danced on his skin, blending into a blur of honeyed whiteness and light brown dots, and even as ease was far from his features, he still bathed in the sun. "I don't tell them things unless it's really important."

"Being in a relationship for nineteen months isn't really important?" Caden could hear the astonishment in his voice, but hell... he hadn't known Bailey was *this* secretive.

"It didn't last, so it doesn't really matter now, does it?" Bailey sighed uncomfortably, looking troubled. "We're one of those dysfunctional families you always hear about, but never believe really exist. I just like to keep my personal life separate from my family life." Turning his face away from the sun, Bailey slid a little closer. His hand returned to Caden's chest, fingers smoothing the cotton shirt. "If they knew I was seeing someone, they'd want details, and they'd want to meet the guy, and it would just get messy. And..." He frowned, licking his lips. To Caden it seemed as if Bailey was just stalling, like this wasn't what he really wanted to say.

"Why would it get messy?" he asked, arms pulling Bailey closer. Bailey's scent encircled him, a warm body against his filled his mind.

"Because they get sad when I'm left behind." Speaking quietly, Bailey went on, "Liam left because I was too difficult... because I was too much of

something and not enough of something else. You said it too; I'm too high-maintenance."

"Hey... I didn't really mean that."

"Yes, you did." Bailey looked up, smiling softly. "It's okay. You don't say things you don't mean. I like that about you. I like that you're honest." With a sigh, his smile trailed off. "I've always liked that about you, even when I didn't like *you*."

Caden gaped at Bailey, pretending to be shocked. "What?" he gasped. "There was a time when you didn't *like* me?"

Bailey raised his brows, unimpressed. "Didn't my detestation come across clear enough?"

"No. See, I think you were just in denial." Caden nodded thoughtfully. "You just couldn't digest my awesomeness."

Rolling his eyes, Bailey slid closer still, muttering sourly. "Your ego really is enormous."

"My ego's perfectly proportioned with the rest of me." Something gigantic and heavy bloomed in Caden's chest when Bailey laughed, all worry swept away. Many times Caden had sat and watched Bailey laugh with their friends, but not once had Bailey aimed those beautiful eyes of his at Caden and given him that look of happiness. Not until a few short weeks ago. Now Caden got it daily. And still he remembered the time when scorn and taunting were the only things shared between him and Bailey.

"Seriously, though..." Searching Bailey's face, Caden stroked his fingers along Bailey's cheek. "I know I'm a jerk sometimes, but I never meant to hurt you. And I guess I never realized that I did." He rubbed his thumb against the tender spot just beneath Bailey's ear. "I'm sorry. But it wasn't your fault it never worked out before. They just didn't know how to treat you right."

"Oh yeah? And I suppose you do?"

"I think I'm getting pretty good at it." Might be just Caden's enormous ego translating things favorably, but that was definitely a glint of content in Bailey's eyes. So, yeah... Caden was pretty confident he had things under control.

"So that's your reason?" he asked after a moment of silence. "You wanted to keep things a secret, because it'll save you the trouble of family interference?"

“That was a part of it, I guess.”

“What’s the other part?”

Bailey stared back for a few seconds, a level of sharpness returning to his gaze. “I didn’t want people to know that I was as easy as everybody else. And... I don’t know...” He glanced at Caden. “I guess I feared they would know what we do.”

“What we do?” The happy buzz had vanished, and Caden crashed right back to reality.

Bailey tilted his head up, gazing towards the branches. “Yeah... the kinky stuff.”

“Kinky stuff?” Caden studied Bailey’s profile carefully. The snappiness was back, and whether or not it had been Caden’s ego making assumptions, there was absolutely nothing content about Bailey’s current mood. He was all dislike and uncertainty.

Silly Bailey.

“Kinky stuff, huh?” Caden spoke nonchalantly, not bothered by the lack of response. “You mean like when I like to tie your hands to those nice little knobs on your bedpost and then eat dessert in bed?” Looking displeased, Bailey frowned but didn’t say a word. That was cool; Caden could work with that. “Or that one time when I kept you tied up all night long and didn’t even let you come until it was like... what... five in the morning? You mean that kind of kinky—?”

Bailey muttered sourly. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Caden nudged his knuckles under Bailey’s chin. “If you don’t talk about it, and if I don’t talk about it, how could anyone know?” Bailey looked down when Caden tilted the man’s face up towards him. “It’s private, Bay.” Like Caden would ever let anyone know how Bailey fell apart and dragged Caden with him. “And if you think I would tell someone, then I must say; you don’t really know me.”

Bailey worried his lip, still refusing to meet Caden’s eyes. “I know. I know you wouldn’t.” He knitted his fingers in Caden’s shirt. “I’m just not used to this, I guess.”

“What? Being in love with the most fabulous guy in the world?”

Snorting, Bailey finally looked up. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Yes. And you love me for it." Caden ignored Bailey's mocking glare and went on to smooth the front of his shirt, capturing Bailey's hand in his. "All is well, my dear," he said. "I love you, too." He kissed Bailey's knuckles, loving how Bailey was unable to hide his joy over such simple words. His smile was a little reluctant, but it was still there, and the way his freckled skin turned soft pink from the tip of his chin to the roots of his hair made Caden smile too.

"Contrary to what I may have said in the past, it's actually pretty easy." Nodding, Caden nudged his lips against Bailey's. "A must, really. Like a basic need. Loving you is right next to breathing. I just can't stop."

Bailey chuckled. "Now you're just overdoing it."

"No, no. Watch." Caden clasped a hand over his mouth and pinched his nose, a smile tugging on his lips when he saw Bailey bite his lip to keep himself from laughing. After several seconds, Caden let go of his nose and inhaled deeply. "See? Just can't do it."

Barely inches away, Bailey nestled against Caden's chest. "Should I expect these demonstrations on a daily basis?" he asked with a smile. Caden shrugged. "If that's what it takes." He wasn't fooled by the easy smile on Bailey's face; the man still had his doubts. Admittedly, Caden had close to zero experience on how to maintain a happy relationship, but he was a quick learner. And he was not going to fail Bailey.

"I love you, Bailey," Caden said with conviction, his arms once again wrapped around Bailey's shoulders. Sliding his palm to the nape of Bailey's neck, Caden pulled the man closer still. "I won't ever stop telling you that."

Bailey watched him in silence, fingers sliding gently along Caden's face. "Okay," the man whispered, gently, so incredibly gently Caden could almost feel him speak. Tenderly, the touch feathered along Caden's cheek, from his temple to his jaw. "So... yeah... I told my mother." Bailey shrugged absently, his gaze following the movements of his hand. "I guess that makes this really important." Finally, his hand stopped, cupped against Caden's cheek. Hazel eyes settled on Caden's brown ones, not a hint of fear in that solid gaze. "Because I really want this to last." There was a little bit of fear in his voice, but it wasn't fear of losing something he wanted to keep; it was fear of speaking out loud, what he'd always kept hidden before. That was his weak spot, and Caden loved being the one Bailey showed it to.

Caden sighed casually. "Guess you're stuck with me, then." Bailey smiled and nodded, trust so evident in his eyes, it nearly broke Caden's heart.

Bailey crossed those last few inches and kissed Caden, gently stroking his lips against Caden's, while his hand slid from Caden's cheek to the side of his neck. Eyes closed, Caden pulled Bailey closer, loving the taste and feel of the man. It felt unlike anything Caden had felt before; each kiss from Bailey felt new and wonderful and rare, like it was the very first time he touched the man, though there had been hundreds of times prior to this one. But Caden took it, took it and treasured it, inching closer until their legs were entwined and not a breath could've passed between their bodies.

Steps thumped against the porch's floor, but Caden didn't care enough to detach himself from Bailey.

"Hey!" It was Ethan. "Are you two done sucking face, or should we just start the flick without you guys?"

Bailey pulled away, snarling. "I just love the eloquence."

Tilting his head back, Caden saw Ethan standing by the door. "We'll be right there."

They got off the hammock, moving carefully as if unwilling to step too far from the other. Bailey picked up their shoes from the grass, while Caden took the water glass, before they headed inside. The whoops and playful whistles welcoming them into the living room made Bailey cringe, and for once Caden could agree that these people really were juvenile sometimes.

After taking the glass into the kitchen, Caden returned to the living room and found Bailey looking around, hands patting the sides of his pockets. "I think I left my sunglasses outside."

"I'll get them."

Bailey's "thank you" came in a form of a small smile, and he settled on the couch, while Caden went to get the glasses. The movie was playing by the time he got back inside, and everybody had settled on the couch and chairs. Bailey scooted to the side to give Caden room to sit next to him. The sunglasses ended up on the coffee table, and Caden took his seat next to Bailey. Maybe there weren't many public displays of affection initiated by Bailey, but he didn't shy away from the closeness. Knowing glances were exchanged across the room, but for once Bailey didn't react. He turned slightly towards Caden and tilted his

bent knees over Caden's lap, smiling contently when Caden wrapped his arm over Bailey's shoulders and pulled him closer.

Yeah... all was good.

The End

Author Bio

C.C. Jaz writes for the same reason that she reads; for fun, for drama, for amusement, and for entertainment. She has a thing for clichés and hopes she can find at least one or two in every book she reads. She likes her characters flawed, seeing how no one's perfect. Still, she is a firm believer that a right someone will turn anyone's flaws into victories. Guess that makes her a romantic.