

A night scene of fireworks exploding over a body of water. The fireworks are in shades of red, blue, and white, creating a vibrant display against the dark sky. In the foreground, a stone walkway with a metal railing runs along the water's edge. The railing is made of vertical bars and has some faint markings on it. The walkway is paved with large, rectangular stones. In the background, a dark, silhouetted hillside rises from the water's edge. The overall atmosphere is festive and celebratory.

# Blame The Fireworks

A Love is an Open Road Story  
by  
Riina Y.T.

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## BLAME THE FIREWORKS

**By Riina Y.T.**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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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# BLAME THE FIREWORKS

By Riina Y.T.

## Photo Description

The photograph shows a black-and-white close-up of the face of a pretty, young man. His eyes are closed, and he appears to be sleeping, content.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*My roommate's brother is visiting again and sleeping on our couch. I tiptoe around and pray I don't run into anything or cause a clatter that would wake him. All knees and elbows, that's me—while he's all strength and grace. Looking at him, I can't help my wistful sigh. He's beautiful, but that's not it. It's his gentle smiles and kindness. Unlike everyone else, he doesn't treat me like I'm one stumble away from being declared a walking disaster zone.*

*Unfortunately, he also treats me like a kid brother. He ruffles my hair and calls me 'kiddo'. I wish I wasn't so awkward. I wish I was sexy so he'd want me the way I want him. I wish I was the one he dreamed about as he slept on the couch.*

Dear Author, could you wave your magic wand to grant my wish? An HEA would be wonderful.

*Sincerely,*

*Jessa Ryan*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** friends to lovers, slow burn/UST, road trip, sweet romance, actor, internship/education

**Word Count:** 38,454

*Dedication*

Dear Jessa, this is for you! =)

# **BLAME THE FIREWORKS**

**By Riina Y.T.**



## Chapter One

*Harlie*

*Fold the paper in half on the diagonal. Crease well and unfold. Bring the top right tip to meet at point A. Repeat with the top left.*

I was staring at the small orange square I made out of the origami paper and frowned. It didn't look quite right, kind of uneven. Definitely not as good as the one I'd just finished. I unfolded the square and repeated the steps until I was satisfied with the result. Not that the kids would care whether the foxes were crinkled and came with bent snouts. They'd be just as cute to them. I loved how kids saw beauty and excitement in everything, no matter how flawed or ordinary to our eyes. Still, I would try hard to have them all look the best I could manage.

I was in the middle of folding my fifth origami fox when I heard the familiar sounds of a door opening. I'd been sharing the small city apartment with Lewis for a little over a year now. Knowing he'd bring company, I reached over a low stack of colorful paper, which I intended to go through before tonight, and grabbed the white remote to turn down the volume on my iPod. The 'I heart Sundays' playlist I found on Spotify played an unfamiliar alternative rock ballad, the catchy melody filling the room when Lewis appeared by my side.

"We brought you lunch, klutzy," Lewis announced, flashing me a bright grin.

He dropped a white plastic bag in front of me onto the wooden table. I cursed when half of it landed on top of my origami creation. A black baseball cap fell next to it; the bold white letters on its front reading "*F\*\*in' Problems*". Typical Lewis fashion. I would bet money on it, that every second piece of clothing he owned had the F-word printed or sewed on somewhere.

"You mean you brought me your leftovers?" I said maybe a little too excited and reached for the bag. Lewis never finished his meals, so I didn't mind that they'd probably gotten their half-eaten sandwiches and cold fries to go. He knew cold fries were my idea of a perfect meal; I appreciated the thought.

"Same thing," Lewis answered with a lopsided grin, his blue eyes sparkling, teasing. He ran a hand over his short cropped blond hair and turned to leave

without another word. I reached into the plastic bag and removed the white takeout box. Setting it aside, I opened it. Yep, just like I'd predicted: half-eaten bacon and cheese sandwich and a bunch of golden brown fries, thin and curvy, smelling deliciously unhealthy—*Yum*.

Looking around the living room, I noticed Tabby was still nowhere to be seen. I hadn't had the chance to say hello when he'd arrived last night, since Lewis took him to some club party straight after fetching him at the bus stop in town. I'd already been prisoner to my dreams by the time they'd gotten home, and slept in this morning while they decided to go out shopping or something. I'd been far too excited that he'd be staying with us for longer than just the typical two days.

I straightened out my crumbled origami fox and repeated the last couple of steps to make sure it would look good enough. Brushing my fingertips along the paper, I shivered lightly. I wasn't very fond of how dry and scratchy it felt against my skin. I also wasn't the most skilled person when it came to arts and crafts, or anything else to be honest, but I told myself I could do this, for the kids, which quickly became my mantra for the day.

While folding and bopping my head to the upbeat song, I slipped fries into my mouth, wiping salty fingers on my neon green sweatpants in between. Behind me the wooden floor creaked, and I swallowed a mouthful of fries, finishing the final step of my seventh origami fox, just as Tabby came around the table.

He grabbed the beanie off my head and swiftly ruffled my hair in an all too familiar manner. I cringed, trying to enjoy the feeling of his long fingers smoothing through my hair, but I couldn't shake the sense of discomfort the action stirred within me. It was frustrating to think he saw me as a kid brother at best. True, it was worlds better than being some irritating guy his brother roomed with, someone he endured instead of liked, but still. Tabby was one of the nicest guys I'd ever met, and I knew he liked me, but sadly not in the same way I liked him.

*If wishes were horses...*

"Oooh, I like that one. I'll give it a nine. It's classy and yet somehow casual," he said with a grin and waved the beige piece of clothing in front of my face.

I had to look away from his pleased face, feeling my cheeks heating up incredibly fast. If it were possible for blushes to materialize, huge drops of red color would be oozing out of my pores whenever he was near.

“Thanks,” I muttered, feeling a wave of embarrassment washing over me when he dropped the beanie back on my head.

*And can you please refrain from doing that damn ruffling thing to my hair?* I wanted to add, I really did, but the words wouldn't come out. Telling him how much I disliked his disheveling my hair, like I was a child, just wasn't going to happen. I couldn't bring myself to voice the words, no matter what, perhaps because I might actually miss it.

Thing was, I had a rather large collection of beanies and ever since we'd first met, Tabby'd made a habit out of rating them or some shit. He seemed to think it was fun telling me what his thoughts on my accessories were.

I was biting down on my lower lip, hard, desperately trying to school my expression when I felt Tabby sit down next to me on the wooden bench rather than seeing it. There was that strange, slightly unnerving, but incredible vibe in the air whenever he was close. It made my skin tingle all over.

“What'cha doing, Kiddo? Oh, hey, that looks cool!”

Tabby's usually low and mellow voice reached an adorable high pitch that had me jerk my head in his direction. I'd heard that sound a few times when we were doing movie nights and he was commenting on something exciting that happened on screen.

I watched Tabby pick up one of my origami creations, holding it close to his face and examining it carefully. Allowing my gaze to travel down Tabby's form, I took in his full appearance. He was dressed in a gray cardigan over a plain white tee, a thin Lux pattern scarf lazily thrown over his shoulders. I admired his amazing sense of style, and how he made literally everything work. The jeans he was wearing were a lush Bordeaux color and hugged his hips and long slender legs just right. The urge to linger was immense. I loved his strong, gorgeous thighs.

“Hmm,” Tabby hummed. “Hey, man. Look, is this supposed to be a dog?”

When he gazed at me, Tabby was smiling brightly, the sight of his plump pink lips and beaming sea-green eyes causing my breath to catch. Thankfully I'd forced my gaze away from his crotch area before he caught me staring.

“A fox.” I cleared my throat. “I'm making origami animals for tomorrow's festival at the kindergarten.”

“Cool.” Tabby grinned, looking excited—he reminded me of that one kid in my group. Jeremy, if I remembered right—all pure sweetness and always bouncy with too much puppy excitement. “Can I help?”

“Um, sure. If you like.”

Was he seriously offering to help? I couldn't imagine he'd enjoy folding paper animals for the next few hours or so.

“Awesome! How many of those do we have to make?” Tabby asked, looking genuinely excited as he reached for a second fox I'd made.

“One hundred?” It came out as a question, though it wasn't. I was afraid the ridiculous amount of needed origami would freak him out, and he'd realize he better get out of here as fast as he could.

Tabby's eyes widened for a moment, but it didn't appear to have dampened his enthusiasm much. He held two paper foxes next to each other, comparing them, and then he beamed at me and asked, “How long did it take you to make those...” He quickly counted them. “Seven?”

Uh. “An hour, maybe?” I could only guess since I hadn't timed myself. “But together we'll be faster and I've totally taken my time doing those. Redone a couple too, so they'd be perfect. They don't have to be perfect though.” Seriously, now? Was I *begging* him to stay? I sounded pathetic.

Tabby seemed to consider what I said and nodded, gazing down at the table, probably wondering if he wanted to do such a boring task, with me on top of that, when there'd be a million and one more exciting things to do. But then he looked back up again and his lips curved into a huge smile, and I could swear I felt my heart literally stutter for a moment.

“All right, we better get started then,” Tabby announced, grinning, and scooted closer. I was frozen to the spot, watching his hand reach for a brown square of paper. He held it out in front of him and looked around the table, unsure, before asking, “What do I do?” He chuckled.

“First you decide what animal you want to make.” I picked up the plastic folder that sat next to me on the bench and slipped the instruction sheet between us on the table. “Pick one of those and go to the page with instructions for it. I've been doing foxes, so we open page five,” I explained and laid open said page. “Follow the directions from step one to twelve and voila! You've made a fox.”

“Sweet. I think I'll make a squirrel if that's okay? It looks easy for my first time,” Tabby said and winked. Then he opened page number seven that held the directions. I'd made that one before, it was a good choice.

“Sure,” I agreed. “You can make whatever strikes your fancy. I was planning on having a few of each anyway.”

When Tabby looked up from the instructions, our eyes met and I felt myself flush deeply. Shit, shit, shit. I hoped it didn't show. It probably did, despite my slightly tanned skin.

“Cool.” He grinned. “We can try all of them out then.”

“Are you, uh, sure you don't have anything better to do?”

Tabby shook his head. “This looks fun and you can clearly use some help. So, let's do this.”

“Okay,” I whispered and picked up a brown square of paper as well, deciding I could also make a squirrel.

I sent a prayer into the universe: *Please don't let me make an idiot out of myself for once.* Just one time I'd like to survive a day without breaking anything or inflicting pain on myself and the people close to me. Let Tabby think that me being normal wasn't completely impossible. I hoped that was true.

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## Chapter Two

The loud bark of my phone startled us. Damn that guy. Lewis must've changed my ring tone to one of those weird-ass sounds again, leaving me with an annoying dog bark today. Tabby and I exchanged looks, and he burst out laughing, knowing well how that had gotten there. Lewis had pulled that prank on everyone we knew. I picked up my phone as it continued barking at me, but when I saw the caller ID I quickly pressed the red dismiss button. So not in the mood for *that* talk. I suppressed an irritated shiver. Tabby shot me a questioning look, and I quickly shook my head.

“Not important,” I said before he could open his mouth and press on. I was just about to return the phone to the table when it slipped right out of my hands and fell facedown on the floor between Tabby and me. Great. I hoped it wasn't broken. It was amazing that it still worked, considering I'd dropped it more times than I could count. Once in the toilet bowl. Thank God after I'd flushed. Still—*yuck*.

I let out a sigh and twisted in my seat to reach for my phone. My hand nearly made contact with the fallen object when suddenly a sharp pain exploded in my left temple and I saw bright stars. In shock, I pulled away gracelessly and smacked my right arm into the hard surface of that stupid wooden table. Damn that had hurt.

“Jeez, Kiddo. That's one hard head you've got there.”

Crap. Slight dizziness washed over me, not so much from the impact but rather from the embarrassment of bumping heads with Tabby. He was holding out the phone to me—no broken screen, thank God—and rubbing his right temple with his other hand.

“Sorry! Oh God, I'm so sorry,” I apologized, struck with a near panic attack. This couldn't be happening! My cheeks were now blazing like a furnace and I racked my brain for something to say, but Tabby beat me to it.

“Don't worry, nothing happened. Probably not even a bruise if I'm lucky.”

He was smiling gently, still rubbing his temple though. I felt so guilty I wanted to disappear into thin air. And it didn't help that Tabby always said things like that, always so kind, as if he honestly didn't mind I'd nearly given him a bruise, right on his pretty face.

Oh, no, no, no! What if it was going to leave a bruise? It'd be my fault if he'd get in trouble at work!

Tabby did stage acting and modeling from time to time. I'd seen him in a magazine once and on an advertisement poster for a designer clothing line a couple of times. Seeing him pose so beautifully in a fancy suit and glasses, all impressive and gorgeous had filled me with a strange sense of pride, because I knew him, and jealousy, because I didn't want other people looking at him. Which was, of course, utterly ridiculous.

While I was still suffering from my shock, Tabby handed me back my phone, and I carefully put it on the table with both hands, making sure it was impossible for it to slip through my fingers a second time.

"Thanks," I muttered and looked away, feeling absolutely mortified. Stuff like that happened all the time, but those moments were even worse when Tabby was there to witness my butterfingering mishaps.

I quickly stood and offered to get us refreshments as a way of steering the conversation far, far away from the incident, because knowing myself I'd just make a bigger mess out of it if I'd opened my mouth to apologize again. I couldn't deal with more weirdness right now.

Tabby touched my shoulder and insisted, "Sit down, I'll get us a drink."

Unable to argue I did as he said and sat back down. He probably wanted to prevent another disaster from happening. I sighed and my shoulders slumped. Letting me fetch snacks, especially drinks, was probably as dangerous as letting a stoned monkey with two left hands do it.

An older Franz Ferdinand song I vaguely remembered played in the background as I counted the origami foxes, squirrels, and rabbits we'd made so far. Thirty-eight. Not too bad, considering we'd only been at it for about another hour. I put away the forgotten sandwich and fries, dropping the plastic bag on the floor so we had more room for the paper crafts.

While waiting for Tabby I looked around the room and smiled at the sunlight streaming in through the small window, surrounding the bright green baby plant I'd bought the other day.

We should get a lot more plants; they really do brighten the room. The green looked good in contrast to the red brick walls. The many black metal shelves held lots of books, small knickknacks and photo frames; they'd be the perfect spot for more plants.

“All right, I think I’m going to make some of those foxes you did earlier. They’re super cute.”

Hearing Tabby’s voice so close to my ear surprised me, and I jumped a little. The bastard chuckled and placed a can of Sprite in front of me. I straightened and put on a forced smile, trying to forget about what happened.

“Hey, where is Lewis? I haven’t seen him since you two got here.”

“Probably in his room? Said he wanted to call his girl, and I’m guessing they’re still Skyping.”

Right. Lewis’s latest girlfriend lived in Wisconsin. They met online a few months ago and were video chatting a lot. Thankfully he wore those big-ass earphones most of the time and my bedroom was above the kitchen and not his. I didn’t want to hear whatever they were up to unless someone paid me.

For a moment I watched Tabby folding; his brows were drawn together in concentration and his teeth were pulling at his full, lower lip. Mmm... those lips were captivating, and the play of his teeth—pulling and biting, tugging and nipping—was fascinating. I was suddenly so very aware of how close he was sitting. Then there was his scent enveloping my senses, fresh yet spicy and absolutely delicious. I bit back a growl and went about folding another paper animal myself, praying I could stay focused on doing that and only that.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Look, Tabby. What do you think?”

Proudly, I showed Tabby the swan I’d been working on for far too long. The paper was light pink and looked nearly perfect, almost none of the edges were crinkled. I’d messed up once but straightened it out and now it looked quite good.

“Cute! You made a bird.” Tabby’s lips lifted at the corner and he beamed at me.

“Uh. It’s actually supposed to be a swan,” I said awkwardly, pointing to a picture of a small bird and then held up my swan to Tabby. “Look, it’s so much bigger than the bird.”

Tabby chuckled, and I flushed.

“Cool swan, Harlie.” Tabby winked at me, and I probably flushed even more. “No, seriously. That’s pretty awesome.”



I involuntarily shivered at the sound of my name on his lips. I noted he looked truly impressed. Well, the swan wasn't *that* good, and I told him so.

"I think it's incredible. Your swan rocks, and it looks far more advanced than my squirrels." He held up one crooked brown squirrel and frowned. "As you can see I still keep on ruining those. You're pretty good with your hands there."

Tabby looked like he was smirking now, and there was something odd flashing across his face, but it was gone as I blinked. "The kids will love it."

He sounded sincere, and his kind words stirred a certain warmth inside me. It felt good, yet I squirmed a little beneath his praise. He reached for a pink square of paper and began reading the directions for a swan, despite complaining that it looked too difficult. Why he chose to make a pink one, I had no idea, but I liked the idea of having two of the same color, because I so wasn't going to make another one. Those were definitely more advanced and I didn't have all day.

I watched Tabby's hands moving gently over the origami paper, tracing the outline of my swan, comparing it to the pictures. I shivered slightly. His touch so careful, examining. The way the thin sheet would feel underneath his fingertips, smooth and dry. I met Tabby's eyes, and he grinned.

"You'll help me if I'm stuck, okay? You're the expert." He shoved a wayward flop of sandy hair away from his eyes and began folding.

I didn't dare speak. This was surreal. I still couldn't believe Tabby was making paper animals with me. It wasn't the most exciting way to pass time, and I'd never choose to do this myself if I hadn't signed up to bring in a hundred origami by tomorrow. I was only doing it for the kids, but the task had turned out to be a lot more enjoyable with Tabby's company, despite my incorrigible gawkiness.

Failing to concentrate on folding, I allowed myself a glance at Tabby, looking all concentrated, like he was truly enjoying this. He was half smiling, and I lingered a moment, admiring his lush lips. Their pink dusting and defined cupid's-bow made them appear like they'd been sculpted out of the most precious material in some ancient, far away country. Worth a king's ransom and absolutely irresistible.

Tabby was beautiful, but what really made my knees weak and my head spin were his gentle smiles and kindness, his overwhelming kindness. Unlike

everyone else, he never treated me like the walking disaster zone I officially was.

Not for the first time, I wished I were as sexy and confident as his fellow actors, or the models I saw in magazines and posters across town. Knowing it was pointless, I still prayed for a miracle, or a falling star camouflaged by fireworks. *Something*—I'd take anything—that would grant me my wish and make him want me the way I wanted him.

\*\*\*\*

### Chapter Three

“Oh my God! What are you two freaks doing?”

Lewis. Ever the sweetheart. He’d finally decided to join us after another hour and a half. We were almost finished with our—my—assignment too. Thank Heavens. My hands felt like they were bloody and bruised on the inside and out.

“We’re making origami animals,” Tabby said and motioned for his brother to sit down. “Park your butt and give us a hand, bro. We could use some help.”

“No way in hell, ass-wipe. These fingers were made for *a lot* of godly things, but definitely *not* for making paper toys.” The jeer in his voice was clearly evident, and I refrained from rolling my eyes in a childish manner.

“It’s okay, we’ve only got twenty-two left now.” Instead I turned to look at Tabby and smiled gratefully. “I can finish them myself if you want to hang out with Lewis. Do something fun for a change, you know.”

“Nah, we’re faster if I help you, right?”

I nodded, and Tabby went to work on another white rabbit without another word. He was right of course, and I was so thankful he was helping me this much. It had made a big difference, and I wondered how I could possibly thank him for all this.

“How’s Tamara?” Tabby asked his brother who was sitting across from us, making dumb comments and telling stupid jokes he’d read on the internet.

“All right.”

Tabby raised his eyebrows. “Is she going to come visit in the summer?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe I’m gonna visit her. I don’t wanna talk about it, okay?”

“Oo-kay,” Tabby said, drawing out the first syllable. He scrunched up his nose and made a stupidly funny face at his brother, who countered by throwing one of our origami.

“Dude, leave them alone!” I yelled before I could stop myself, but I wasn’t going to watch Lewis destroy hours of work because he thought it was funny to act like a child.

“Chill, man. I’m not gonna break your precious birds. Jeez.”

Lewis could be an idiot, but he wasn’t cruel, so I decided to ignore him and finish my paper cat. No, I was making a rabbit, or was I? Oh please, let me be finished already. I was probably going to dream about those stupid squirrels, rabbits and foxes!

“All right guys, I’m outta here. Let’s do pizza and movies tonight,” Lewis announced and left us to finish our task.

Thirty minutes later we were finally done. I got up and brought a cardboard box from my room upstairs, large enough to fit all one hundred and two origami. Tabby helped me stack them inside, working carefully and more neatly than I, having almost no energy left to wrap things up with much care. At this point I almost couldn’t be bothered whether we smashed half the origami. Like I said, the kids wouldn’t love them any less.

I put the rest of the material away, stuffing them in one of the half-empty drawers by our shared computer desk and set the box with origami by the front door. I opened the door to see if it would bump into the box, but it didn’t. Nice. I wasn’t going to risk falling up the stairs with that thing and there was no need for it to be sitting in my room when I needed it in the morning.

I found Tabby in the kitchen, leaning against the white table in the center, sipping on a glass of water. I forced my pulse to slow down and smiled feebly, feeling a little jittery.

“Thank you for today,” I said, and Tabby looked up, our eyes locking. “I totally miscalculated. I hadn’t expected making all those origami would take so long. I probably wouldn’t have finished them on time. You really saved my ass.”

“Anytime, Kiddo,” Tabby promised with a smile. “Happy I could help.”

I watched him down the rest of his water, taking in the beauty of his Adam’s apple working as he swallowed. He was so gorgeous it hurt. Tabby put the empty glass in the dishwasher, and I got a little lost staring at his amazing, round butt as he bent down and backed up. I scolded myself for being so stupid, but Tabby either hadn’t noticed that my eyes had been literally glued to his backside, or he decided to spare the lame gay boy the extra embarrassment. Not that he knew I was.

“I’ll just go and have a shower,” Tabby announced and slowly walked toward me. I was still stiffly standing in the doorway, so I moved out of the

way for him. “My hands need some serious soaking. God, they’re sore. Are yours okay?”

They hurt some and were disgustingly dry, but still I nodded. Tabby was standing so close now I could smell his spicy aftershave again. I fought the urge to inhale deeply, but that didn’t stop me from feeling like melting into a puddle right there. His eyes were so bright and filled with concern as he looked down at me. Tabby once said he was five-eleven, which made him a good three inches taller. It wasn’t much of a difference, but I liked that he had to look down at me. For some strange reason it thrilled me that I was shorter, even if it was just a little. Weird, right?

Tabby was still looking at me oddly so I cleared my throat and held out my hands, palms up. “No bruising,” I choked out for the sake of saying something.

I wasn’t as pretty as Tabby, a bit on the stocky side, unruly dark hair and yeah, I was self-conscious when others stared at me. That was why I was beginning to get all squirmy and uncomfortable just about now.

Before I could open my mouth and say anything, Tabby reached for my hands and looked at them closely, examining my palms with his long, slender fingers. The twisting knife in my stomach was instant and left me brutally dizzy.

“No bruising,” Tabby repeated my earlier words, a smirk playing on his lips. “That’s good. Maybe put on some cream; they’re all rough and dry.” His eyes twinkled—those large eyes, almost almond-shaped and the deepest emerald green I’d ever seen, framed by millions of long lashes.

A familiar rush of heat surged to the surface of my skin. Why did I have to be blushing all the damn time? It wasn’t as if Tabby actually had any interest in me whatsoever. But I did have his attention; his focus was all on me. It was thrilling and intimidating. I wished I could have more of that and more of everything he’d never given me. I wanted his smiles to brighten the room, have him secretly smile only at me. I wanted his passion, hugs, and kisses and let his laughter fill the empty spaces in between.

The next thing I knew I was alone, leaning against the doorway and praying for my head to stop spinning. Huh. That was odd. I could’ve sworn Tabby had looked at me differently just then, searching but not finding. He’d seemed so far away for a moment, and a little lost.

Shit, I was seriously going insane. That had to have been all in my head. I was weird like that. Shaking my head, I grabbed a big green apple from the

bowl on the table and headed for my room. I needed a little time for myself, maybe play a video game or read, and then get mentally ready for tonight's movie marathon. It was nice having Tabby around our rather small apartment, but at the same time it came with its hurdles. It would be more fun if I wasn't so damn attracted to the guy.

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## Chapter Four

“Let’s have popcorn!”

The sounds were muffled, but I heard Lewis ask clearly, and when Tabby replied, he sounded exasperated. At this point I probably missed half their previous conversation.

“We just had pizza. Two boxes. You can’t possibly want popcorn. You never eat that much!”

“Harlie, dude, be a darling and make us popcorn, will you?”

“Come on, Lewie, get it yourself.”

I heard them argue, but I couldn’t concentrate on what was being said, as it was, my brain had a difficult time catching up with what the scene unfolding before my eyes meant. It smelled soapy. My feet were wet; the socks soaked. Where did all those bubbles come from? And why in hell was I standing in a puddle of water?

Oh my God, why was this happening?

I’d just filled the washing machine with a load of my dirty clothes, adding Lewis’s shirt. I’d planned on washing them tomorrow, but then I *had* to drop a slice of pizza on Lewis when I was serving everyone dinner. So much for trying to be useful. And of course, Lewis freaked, insisting I wash it right away because “the tomato would stain on the white fabric”, and he was probably right.

But how had I gotten from everything being okay and working to *this* in mere seconds?

“Harlie? Do we have any popcorn? My brother is being an ass and—Oh, shit!”

Yep. Shit indeed. A huge bucket full of shit. I turned to find Tabby so close behind me I nearly bumped into his chest. The faint scent of roses enveloped me. Was that Tabby? He’d changed into a plain black tee and white beach shorts after his shower and looked as gorgeous as ever. I scolded myself. This was not the time to check out my roommate’s brother for chrissake.

“We gotta turn off the electricity! It’s the washing machine. I fucked it up. Is there a plug somewhere? Oh shit, we need to find the plug!”

“I don’t know, man, but I’ll find it,” Tabby said calmly and squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t panic, okay?”

I nodded. Who was panicking? Not me. No. Shit, I *was* panicking. But hey, I was about to flood the entire apartment with soapy water. I had the right to panic a little.

Tabby threw me a large blue towel. “Sop it up,” he said calmly and moved around the malfunctioning washing machine. Tabby lifted one side and dragged it away from the wall.

“Gotcha,” he called out in triumph and pulled the plug. The drum slowed down and the water that had been dripping past the glass window stopped after a heartbeat or two. I let out a deep sigh.

“Total disaster avoided. No meltdown today.” Tabby turned to look at me with a smile on his lips, always with that gentle smile. “I think we have to plug it in again and drain the drum before you can run it again. The door wasn’t closed all the way and there’s still a lot of water inside. It will just continue to leak.”

Oh shit. The door. How did I not close it right? And why would the machine even work when it wasn’t closed properly?

“Okay,” I said lamely, then cleared my throat before bending forward and lowering myself onto all fours, ignoring the wetness sinking into my sweatpants. The icky sensation still made me shiver. *Yuck!*

Tabby announced he would plug the machine back in and once it started up again, all the lights started blinking rapidly, and I set to work on the drain like he’d suggested.

“What the hell are you two doing in here?” Lewis came barreling into the laundry room, nose scrunched up and brows furrowed. “I thought we’re gonna have popcorn. And why do you guys always disappear on me?”

Then his jaw dropped. Lewis was staring at us in utter disbelief, panicked, like he was witnessing a murder scene or something equally horrifying. I couldn’t decide whether to laugh or apologize for almost flooding our apartment. I bit my lip to keep myself from doing both. I knew it wasn’t funny, only it was.

“Shit, dude, what the ever-living fuck happened here?”

“It looks worse than it is, bro.” Tabby put an arm around Lewis and started guiding him backward and out of the tiny laundry room that barely fit three adults and a washing machine.



“Harlie has it all under control now,” Tabby reassured his brother, who was trying to linger, looking awestruck and unsure what to say about the mess I’d made.

I gave them my best smile and a thumbs up, which rewarded me with a grin from Tabby and a deep scowl from Lewis, before Tabby dragged Lewis back down the hall. Watching after them, I noticed a thinly stretched puddle of soapy water was slowly creeping out into the hallway, inch by inch. I sighed.

The sound of popcorn popping and some action-filled movie playing in the living room, combined with the noise of my two friends arguing provided a lulling soundtrack while I was mopping up the floor and getting the washing machine running again. I checked the door twice before pressing the start button this time. I so wasn’t going to risk another near flood.

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## Chapter Five

Something woke me in the middle of the night. I stretched, my stomach heaving. Fragments of an unpleasant dream slowly disappeared into the far back of my mind, fuzzy and dark. I was thankful for not remembering details, which sadly, I often did. Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I took another deep breath and lay still for a long moment, wondering whether I could go back to sleep.

When the memories of my dream tried to solidify, and I thought I could smell familiar scents I didn't want to remember, I quickly threw off the blanket and jumped out of bed. I didn't have the energy left to deal with a full-on nightmare, not tonight.

My bare feet touched the chilled wooden floor, and I shivered. Hopping onto the small, fluffy carpet piece in the middle of my room, I reached for my drawer and pulled out a pair of socks. I also slipped into gray and orange track bottoms and the shirt I wore yesterday. After last night's laundry disaster, I'd been too embarrassed and tired to stick around, and excused myself to bed right after finishing with the cleanup.

The door creaked a little as I opened it, and I hoped Tabby was fast asleep. I'd hate for him to wake up because of my insomnia. The floor beneath me was smooth, too smooth actually. I inched forward on tiptoes and prayed I wouldn't slip and stumble down the stairs at three o'clock in the morning. It wouldn't be a surprise, but definitely something I wished to avoid.

Loud noises—chinking and clacking—and things clattering were the ever present soundtrack of my life. I was constantly tripping over things, and more often than not over things that weren't even there. The other day my foot caught on a step and I fell up the stairs in the public library, books scattering everywhere.

When I reached the last step without any incident, even in the semidark, I let out a silent breath and carefully tiptoed toward the kitchen, passing the laundry room and hallway closet. From where I stood I could make out Tabby on our couch, his body disappearing under a heavy brown fur blanket, his head cushioned by large, beige pillows.

I gingerly rounded the dining table, pondering whether I really needed that glass of water, but I had made it this far without running into anything, so I

decided to get what I came down here for. But instead of turning around and disappearing straight into the kitchen, my feet led me toward the sofa, which was only a few steps to my left anyway. A tiny peek wouldn't hurt. I wasn't going to get all gawking and pervy on Tabby, no, I just wanted to confirm he was sleeping soundly.

When I stood in front of the beige couch, I didn't have a chance to admire Tabby's sleeping form for long, because my foot caught on a power cord I could've sworn hadn't been there before. As I was stumbling forward, catching myself in time before falling facedown on the floor, I brought a metal lamp down with me, hitting the carpet with a dull thud. I hurried to straighten the lamp and put it in its former spot next to the sofa.

As could've been expected, Tabby opened his eyes and slowly dragged his body into a sitting position. Reaching for the lamp, he switched it on, and a low stream of light framed his slumped form.

"Hey, Harlie. I hope I didn't wake you."

Wake me? Huh. Had Tabby been awake? Maybe he'd gotten up for a drink just before me and wondered if I'd heard him in the kitchen or something.

"No. Not at all," I assured him. "I came to get a glass of water. I often wake up in the night, so don't worry."

"Oh." His brows pinched together and he frowned. "That must suck."

"Pretty much." I nodded. "You're up too," I stated and carefully lowered myself down next to Tabby. He scooted away a little farther to make enough space for me. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Uh, yeah. Kind of."

Tabby fidgeted, appearing spooked, and I sensed he wanted to say something more, so I stayed quiet until he spoke again.

"I got a call earlier. You were already in bed," Tabby mumbled as if he didn't want to share whatever it was he was trying to say. I felt a bit at a loss. I didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable and he clearly was. "Ryan, one of my old friends from high school, got into a car accident. He didn't make it."

"I'm so sorry." I knew that sounded lame but it was the first thing that came to mind, and I couldn't think of anything better to add. I had nothing more comforting than a weak sorry.

“The funeral is tomorrow. He passed away a few days ago, after being in the hospital for a while.”

“Why didn’t anyone call you earlier?” I hoped that was an appropriate question. I didn’t want to upset Tabby further, but the thought that nobody had notified him before angered me a little.

“We hadn’t been in touch for a while. I’m lucky his mother thought of me at all. I don’t remember when was the last time we saw each other. I wish I could remember something. Our last conversation or where we’d been that day.”

Tabby looked beaten, and the miserable sight made my heart ache. He scooted all the way back against the couch and rested his hands on his crossed legs, his shoulders were slumped and his face pale, save for the reddish hue around his eyes.

“I’m going to leave tomorrow morning.”

“Is Lewis going with you?”

“No.” Tabby shook his head. “He’s already got plans with his buddies, and a few important appointments this week I wouldn’t want him to miss.”

Even in the semidarkness I could clearly see how much this weighed on him. The usually so cheerful and strong man before me looked lost and so heartbreakingly sad, reminding me of an abandoned kitten in the rain.

“Hey, Harlie?” Tabby asked after a long moment of silence. “Can I... get a hug?”

Tabby’s voice was soft, barely a whisper, as if he wasn’t sure it was really what he wanted to ask. He did though, and when I remained silent, frozen to the spot, he gave me an unexpected gentle grin that set my heart into overdrive, and I did the only thing I could think of—I spread my arms. Tabby’s smile grew, his features softening and his disheveled hair glistening in the warm light from the nearby lamp. I watched him inch closer, moving into the half circle I’d formed, anticipating the moment we’d touch.

When his arms wrapped around me, the sweet scent of him enveloped me, and I fought to suppress a shiver. Goose bumps still ran down my neck and my body stiffened, my muscles feeling tense as wire. I had the sudden urge to pull away like a spooked animal, but forced myself to relax. I felt my breath catch when his arms tightened their grip around my midsection and squeezed. After a long moment of holding on to each other and breathing in his intoxicating

aroma, I felt floaty and blissed out. I was in *Seventh Heaven* and the *Twilight Zone* at once.

Tabby was my friend and if he needed this, I was more than happy to comply. Hell, I was willing to give him whatever his heart desired, even if it was only my silent company. But it would be his, and for as long as he'd want it.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and slowly untangled himself from me. "It just makes me think too much. Our time's limited, isn't it? It's crazy that I wish I'd spent more time with Ryan now that it's impossible to see him again. Not even one last time, you know. It... it sucks."

I nodded and opened my mouth to speak, but it occurred to me that I didn't have anything comforting to say, so I remained silent. I was disappointed at myself for not having something better to give but a weak smile and the useless absence of sound and speech.

"I just wonder—no sorry, forget it. I shouldn't be talking right now."

Tabby's voice was low, and he sounded embarrassed, his timid expression tugging at my heartstrings. I'd never seen him like this before, and it made me even more twitchy than usual. With a deep breath, I tried to find a small smile for Tabby. His cheeks had regained some color and after another long moment he looked at me with focused eyes again.

New, unique feelings stirred in me and I wasn't sure I liked it. The way he looked at me—searching, questioning—made my skin tingle. My heart ached with sweet, sweet pain, as if it remembered that Tabby's love and affections would never belong to us. It was bleeding for a loss not yet experienced. Suddenly I felt as lifeless as the dust bunnies under my bed.

Once more I nodded stupidly and hugged him close one last time, just so I didn't have to look at his face. I planned on pulling away a moment later, but instead we sat there for a long time, not saying anything. Holding one another—breathing, delaying.

"You should go to bed, Harlie," Tabby eventually said, sighing, slowly letting me go. Foolishly, I wished he would hold on a little while longer. "Tomorrow's your big day, right?"

"The kids have been looking forward to the festival all week, yeah." I forced a soft chuckle. I didn't want to end the night on a bitter note, considering Tabby was already grief-stricken and in a bad place.

“Your origami animals will be a hit.” There was a certain fondness in his voice that had a choking effect on me. He really did like them. I felt a little proud, though I probably had no reason to. “You’ll have to tell me everything about it.”

Nodding, I stood and waved awkwardly. Before turning to leave I found a small smile I hoped would convey a fraction of what I felt right then. Gratitude, sympathy, and deep affection. “Good night, Tabby.”

The hand on my arm caught me by surprise, as did Tabby’s soft lips on my cheek. The touch was brief but left my skin all tingly and buzzing. “Night, Harlie,” he whispered and I ran for the stairs like a frightened cat.

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## Chapter Six

The next time I woke it was to my alarm, with a slight headache pounding my skull and my phone sticking to my cheek. Ugh. Today would be my last day at the kindergarten, and I planned on arriving early, with a load of muffins I'd ordered from a bakery that made the most heavenly desserts. The looks on the kids' faces would be worth the frustrating change of buses on my way into town.

With my internship coming to an end, I was left to figure out what it was I wanted to do with my life over the summer. Great. Something I wasn't looking forward to at all, feeling sort of lost. Again. I loved my time at the kindergarten, and when they'd asked me to stay on, I'd wanted to say yes in a heartbeat, because truthfully it had been the best thing I'd done so far.

Kids were amazing, but did I really want to do this for another few years? My whole life even? I hadn't the slightest idea.

I pulled out my favorite pair of gray slacks, a thin purple dress shirt and the most comfortable black D&G boxer briefs, threw them on my bed and then went into the bathroom for my morning shower. Icy cold water managed to wake me up more efficiently than caffeine, but I still loved my morning coffee.

Out in the kitchen I ran into Lewis, who was leaning over the kitchen counter, reaching for his favorite *Simpson* mug. There were still empty pizza boxes scattered across the other side of the counter and the evidence of what looked like last night's popcorn mishaps. I didn't even want to know what happened.

Instead of "good morning" I said, "Sorry for being so clumsy last night." *And all the other times.*

"No, no, you're not clumsy, Harlie," Lewis scoffed, face stubbly and frowny with sleep, cheeks creased with lines from his pillow, I guessed. "You're graceful like a ballerina. On crack."

Yeah I'd heard that one before.

I knew Lewis didn't mean to insult me, and I understood that living with me must be frustrating, but that didn't make me feel any better when he held my clumsiness against me.

"I know, and I said I was sorry. Everything looks as good as new, even your stupid shirt."

Lewis scowled and muttered a sleepy “Thanks” while pouring coffee into his cup and then taking it back into his bedroom. I knew Lewis wasn’t any more a morning person than I was, so I tried not to feel upset about his rudeness.

I let out a sigh and helped myself to a mug, filled it with steaming coffee, then pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. I reached for the issue of a travel magazine that came with the mail the other day, hoping to catch Tabby before he left for his hometown. I inhaled deeply, loving how the scent of freshly brewed coffee filled the small kitchen.

It reminded me of the short time I worked in a coffee shop. Sadly that hadn’t worked out so well. After breaking and staining more things than humanly possible, the lady in charge of overseeing my internship advised me not to show up again. For my own safety, she’d said. Whatever that meant. I understood the implications though and gave up on trying a different coffeeshop chain, or any place where I was supposed to serve customers.

Opening the magazine, I picked up one of the bright-red apples from the bowl on the table and took a bite, heavenly juicy sweetness instantly exploding on my tongue.

“Breathtaking walks to take in London”, it read in an eye-catching italic font, classic white in thin black outlining. A close-up of Big Ben filled the entire glossy page. I turned the thick sheet of paper, imagining what it would be like walking in downtown London. I dreamed of going there some day, spending days filled with sightseeing and exploring, finding small alleys and hidden cafes and pubs. I wondered what the city smelled like on a rainy day.

“What’cha reading, Kiddo?”

Tabby’s deep, mellow voice coming from behind somewhere startled me. I swallowed down the nervous rush I always felt when he spoke to me, or near enough for me to pick up his intoxicating voice. I just wished he’d stop calling me “Kiddo”; I wasn’t a kid and Tabby was barely four years older than me. It sounded ridiculous coming out of his mouth.

“Just a magazine.” I tried to play it casual, nice and casual. I flashed him the cover and smiled. “Travel World.”

The opened page stated, “Tips for rail tripping in Europe on a budget” in bold yellow letters above a picture of a fascinating, rusty-red train surrounded by clear blue skies, a tall snow-blanketed mountain in the back. Images of long



cozy cabin trips across a foreign continent appeared in my mind, where all kinds of exciting adventures, dangerous encounters and life-changing experiences would happen.

“Oh, that looks cool. Do you plan on going to Europe?”

“Yeah!” I answered a little too enthusiastically. I wanted to, badly, but I knew it wasn’t likely to happen any time soon, or ever. “Someday, I mean. Maybe.”

Tabby chuckled and caught my eye. I could feel the heat crawling up my neck and ears, probably coloring me quickly. Then he turned all of his attention to the magazine spread out on the table.

“I want to travel the world, but who doesn’t?” I said wistfully.

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be nice?” Tabby agreed. “It’s not impossible though. Nothing is.”

“Maybe. If I ever find out what to do with my life first.”

I couldn’t stop my eyes from taking in Tabby’s style, his clothing casual and laid-back, and he was still as gorgeous as the heavens. He was wearing a comfortable-looking tan cotton cardigan over a classic black tee, and distressed dark denim that was ripped in too many places to count. I particularly liked their brownish tint.

No, I hadn’t noticed how tight they were on his lean hips, or how they hugged his ass just right before he took the chair and sat down next to me. To put it into one word, Tabby looked mouthwatering.

But that was nothing new, he always did. A pair of black sunglasses were clipped to his V-neck and his usual silver chain disappeared behind it. I briefly wondered how long the jewelry was and whether it held a charm or something. I’d never seen it outside of his shirts.

“It must be gorgeous there in winter. Just look at all that snow and those huge, beautiful mountains.”

Tabby’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts, and I hoped he hadn’t said anything else that I’d missed. I hated it when that happened. I got lost in my daydreams so easily. A dangerous habit. But Tabby just smiled and pointed at the glossy page with the train nearly swallowed up by the pure white snow banks, so I must have been fine.

“My parents almost sent me to a summer camp to the Black Forest in Germany once. One of my aunts lives there, on a farm I think. I was thrilled to

go but chickened out in the end. Lewie was too young to go, and I was afraid I'd be lonely there by myself." Tabby laughed. "I guess I would've had my aunt to keep me company, but the thought of crossing the ocean for the first time all by myself had me scared shitless."

I chuckled, and we shared a smile.

"Shit. Look at the time. I'm sorry but I've got to go," Tabby announced and stood, picking up his glass of water, which he downed in two long gulps.

Tabby sounded apologetic, and I wondered why. Looking at dumb travel magazines wasn't all that fascinating, though I wished he'd stay and tell me more about his past. I could listen to his velvety voice forever.

I watched him straighten his shirt and walk across the room, moving as gracefully as the arch of a rainbow. As always, my eyes had a mind of their own and wanted to linger.

"Hey, Tabby?" I called out after him and then took a deep breath, steeling myself for what I was about to say.

Tabby's eyes met mine across the table. It felt like there wasn't only the kitchen between us but an entire ocean, vast as eternity. I faltered.

"Um, if it weren't such a weird thing to offer, I'd say I'd come along and keep you company, but you probably don't want me at your friend's funeral. I didn't even know Ryan and... and that would be all kinds of weird, right? There are probably a lot of other friends you want to catch up with. I would only be in the way."

I took a deep breath and swallowed. Tabby was staring at me funny, a grin on his lips, which made me feel even more flustered and self-conscious than before.

"You can interrupt me at any moment, you know. I... I'm sorry I was rambling, and you probably—" No I was not going to say it. *You probably don't even want to spend time with me.* The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I didn't want to hear his answer to that. Of course he didn't want to spend time with me, he was only here because he was visiting his brother.

"Thanks, Kiddo." Tabby smiled slowly, his green eyes twinkling. He walked over to me and pulled off my beanie—red-and-white striped, adorned with golden studs. Of course, he ruffled my hair nice and good before dropping the beanie back on top, not bothering to actually pull it over my head. Not that I wanted him to, the ruffling was embarrassing enough.

“I appreciate the thought, really.” Tabby looked thoughtful, and I would never question his sincerity. “But I’d rather have you visit my hometown on a happier occasion. Another time, okay? I’ll be fine.”

“Sure, of course.” It had been a stupid thing to say in the first place, and I regretted ever opening my mouth. But the sweet and tender smile Tabby flashed me before he left almost made it all a lot less idiotic.

I loved when he smiled at me like that—almost as if he was actually seeing me. The real me, the person who adored him to bits and would promise him the world on a silver platter if it were possible.

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## Chapter Seven

A big fat raindrop landed on my nose as I stepped off the bus. Looking up I noted the clouds had gone a dark shade of gray, and I thought the air smelled a little less strong. Another drop fell directly into my eyes, and I squeezed them shut, cursing. The air was thick and warm, and as I began walking, I realized there were still a lot of unpleasant smell molecules bouncing around and increasingly tickling my senses. Stagnant water, fried chicken, garbage, car oil and cheap perfume. The last one definitely the most unpleasant scent.

Leaving the bus stop, I ran into one of our neighbors, the sweet older lady greeting me with a kind smile and a friendly hello. Mrs. Sanchez lived across the hall, and every now and then I brought her groceries. She lived alone and sometimes I could see in her pale blue eyes how lonely she was. It felt rewarding doing something to make her life a little easier.

The festival today had been fun. Everyone loved the origami display, and the kids especially, had a blast. They were a bit of a handful, all wired up, fueled by innocent excitement and a small sugar high. It wasn't surprising how little energy I had left.

My bones were heavy, I felt exhausted, and the light drizzle was starting to irritate me. I was *so* ready for a nice pasta dinner on the sofa. Maybe with a movie or two. My stomach rumbled, confirming just how good that sounded. Thankfully our apartment was merely five minutes away, because I hadn't brought an umbrella or a jacket with me this morning, and I'd rather not get all wet and icky and ruin my good mood.

Rounding the corner that led to my building block, I increased my pace and made it home before a serious shower had the chance to drench me. I was surprised to find Tabby sitting on our doorstep. He was just slipping out of a suit jacket and rolled the gray piece of clothing unceremoniously into a ball, when I came to a halt before him. When he looked up, our eyes met.

“What are you doing here?”

“It's good to see you too.”

Tabby chuckled, and I apologized for sounding a little harsh. I hadn't meant to; I was only surprised to see him. I mean, he was supposed to be out of town for the next few days.

“Have you been waiting out here long?” I asked, clutching the heavy messenger bag to my chest.

“Nah, not really.”

Tabby shrugged and slipped out of expensive-looking brown dress shoes, then produced a pair of black sneakers out of a crinkly black plastic bag and began switching his footwear, stuffing the leather shoes into the bag.

A small roof sheltered us from the soft rain, and I squeezed in closer to the wall to make sure I didn't get my messenger bag any wetter.

I hadn't noticed I'd been staring at Tabby until he nudged my leg and beamed a smile at me. I muttered a barely audible “Sorry” and took the plastic bag he held out to me. I noticed a wrinkled gray suit and white shirt stuffed into the bag. Huh. Tabby must've changed out of his fancy attire and into a pair of ripped jeans—light blue and obviously well worn—in addition to a black tee and leather jacket. I fought the impulse to reach out and run my hands up his legs to feel if they were as soft as they looked.

Everything indicated he'd changed on the way over here. But where? As far as I knew, Tabby didn't have a car with him.

“Are we going inside? Or do you want to enjoy the fresh air a little longer?”

What? Oh. I was staring again, and Tabby was grinning at me with a twinkle in his eye, always with those damn sexy, twinkling green eyes.

I jerked my head away, embarrassed, reached into my messenger bag for the keys, then let us in. Tabby followed me up the two flights of stairs and into our apartment in silence. I wondered why he was here. Had something happened at home? I'd been left with the impression that he wanted to stay a few days with his family, if not the rest of the week, instead of coming back here.

I dropped my bag and slipped out of my sneakers in the hallway, turning to Tabby asking, “Are you hungry? I was going to make pasta. Have some wine maybe. Or whatever you like. I'll make enough for two, if you want any?”

It wasn't supposed to sound like a question but the funny way Tabby looked at me was kind of unnerving. He was smirking too. I didn't know what that look meant and why he seemed to enjoy when I was one second from saying or doing something embarrassing.

“Sure, Kiddo. I'd love something to eat,” Tabby said and took a step closer. “We can order in, though, if you're too tired to cook.”

“No, it’s fine, really.” I shook my head. “I can make something. I want to.” Why? To impress Tabby with my cooking skills? Ugh. How lame was that? For a second I actually thought that would be a good idea.

“Okay, if you insist. I could try to help too, if you need another pair of hands.”

Tabby grinned and I flushed, as expected.

“No big deal, promise. It’s pasta. There’s nothing easier than pasta,” I assured him. Pasta really was easy to cook, and more often than not my preferred dinner because of it. “I’ve got some premade sauce in the freezer. Will only take fifteen minutes, tops.”

At least I was fairly certain the recipe Mrs. Sanchez gave me would impress a little; it tasted absolutely heavenly.

“Okay, cool.” Tabby grinned and reached out to pull off the beanie I was wearing. Dammit! I ducked out of the way before he could ruffle my hair this time. Yes! *Tabby one, Harlie one.*

“Oh, nice move,” Tabby said surprised. “Are we upgrading the game?”

I held my breath as I walked backward, away from Tabby and toward where I hoped the kitchen was. Tabby’s eyes locked with mine, and I faltered. He came closer and reached for me, but I dodged. With flailing hands I stumbled over my own feet, and my grand plan of escaping Tabby’s damn ruffle-attack went to hell when I bumped into the hallway wall. I just barely missed a bookshelf and avoided smacking the side of my head against it, which no doubt would’ve knocked me unconscious.

Great.

I felt Tabby’s grip on my shoulders, steadying me. Carefully, I blinked my eyes open and took a shuddering breath. He was standing so close I could count the beauty marks on his lips and cheek if I had the time.

“You okay?” Tabby asked concerned, his brows slightly pinched together and his bottom lip between his teeth. Was he holding back a laugh?

I nodded, feeling slightly irritated. “Fine.”

“Good, good.” Tabby released his lip and sucked it into his mouth for a second, and then his worried expression turned amused. I knew it! He was enjoying my discomfort a little too much. Jerk.

Before I had the chance to say something witty, Tabby had already sunk his fingers into my doubtless messy hair and disheveled it further.

*Tabby two, Harlie one.* Yeah, yeah. I lost again. Maybe I had to resign to the fact I simply couldn't escape Tabby's attack. He seemed to always get what he wanted, and for some weird reason that was messing with my hair.

I suppressed a frustrated groan that nearly turned into a moan as his hand ran back and forth, tugging and pulling. What was he doing? He would've normally pulled away by now. When the tips of his fingers dug lower, massaging my scalp, my entire body was suddenly rocking like I was in the middle of an earthquake.

I stared at him, losing myself in his eyes, and for a brief moment I wondered what it would be like to lean forward and touch my lips to his. I knew in reality he would probably freak out, run away screaming or something, but in my head, oh in my head it was *perfect*.

When Tabby's darkened gaze fell to my nose then my lips, it was me who panicked, shoving myself farther against the wall, blinking rapidly. Remembering the chaste kiss he'd given my cheek last night, I felt my heart starting to race.

*Is he... going to kiss me?*

No way. Get a grip Harlie. Why I felt an enormous wave of dread and terror washing over me, when I'd *longed* to kiss Tabby for so long, I had no fucking idea.

"I... uh," I stammered, clearing my throat when a very uncool, foreign sound left my lips. "I should get started on dinner."

"Right. Yeah, dinner." Tabby nodded and slowly slid his hand out from my hair. I watched him reach out again, but this time to drop the beanie he'd stolen back onto my head. "Tell me all about your festival later, okay?"

"Sure," I croaked.

Tabby then picked up his bags and went over to the couch, flopping down with a loud thud. I could've sworn his cheeks had been slightly flushed, looking almost embarrassed. I stared after him for a long minute. Shaking my head, I moved toward the kitchen.

In between heating up the sauce and pouring pasta into a pot of boiling water, I got a text from Lewis saying he was staying out with friends from class.

Forgetting I had company, I let myself get lost in the music blasting from the tiny silver kitchen radio and jumped up and down the small room, swinging my wooden spoon and singing along to Def Leppard's "Pour Some Sugar On Me". I loved that song.

Feeling energized and in a really good mood, I filled two plates with Tortiglioni, homemade tomato sauce, and topped it off with a bit of Parmesan cheese and some green leafy stuff I found in one of the containers in the freezer. Basil? Whatever it was called, I was happy with what it did to our dinner. The end result looked good, appetizing, and almost like the pasta the restaurant down the block on River Street served.

I was stupidly shaking my hips and blurting out the final lines of the chorus when I turned and found Tabby standing in the doorway, smirking. The two plates in my hands wobbled slightly, but thankfully, I managed not to drop them. That would've been absolutely mortifying.

"Nice moves, Kiddo," Tabby said, leaning his jeans clad hips against the wall, one hand resting on the opposite side. "I had no idea you danced."

"I... I don't. Not really."

"That's a shame. You clearly know how to do that hip-twisting-thingy."

I tried to ignore the blood bubbling in my veins and the familiar way the heat surged through my body, leaving me a little dizzy and breathless. Placing dinner on the table, I gestured for him to take a seat, which he did, opposite me. Wine and cutlery was already set out, and he dug right in, making obscene smacking sounds with his lips as he chewed. I couldn't shake the feeling he was doing it on purpose.

"Holy cow! This is delicious, Kiddo."

I mumbled a barely audible "Thanks," watching a little starstruck as Tabby devoured his plate of pasta, the red sauce coloring his lush lips artfully. I sipped at my wine a few times before starting my own dinner. I caught Tabby looking at me whenever he sipped on his wine, the buttery amber liquid moving gracefully within the thin confines of the glass.

"Harlie?"

"Yeah?"

I looked up from my empty plate and met Tabby's curious gaze. When he brought the glass to his lips again, I could almost taste its rich and flat, cream-



like texture on my own tongue as he swallowed, a little like oil with a smooth finish.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, then sucked in his bottom lip before setting the glass down. I was craving a taste of his wine-flavored lips more than anything I could recall ever wanting.

“Sure.” I did, didn’t I?

“Do you want to have some fun?”

My heart started racing, and his darkening eyes focusing on me didn’t help. They seemed more intense than ever. Searching, again with the searching.

“Sure?”

Tabby threw his head back and laughed. Great. Way to make a guy feel insecure. Why was he asking me those things? Something weird was going on and I had no clue just how messed up this was going to be. Tabby wasn’t acting his usual self; he appeared a little tense and the lack of his usual calmness was totally new for me.

“Okay. Good,” Tabby said with a smirk and stood.

He carried his empty dishes over to the sink and turned to me when I walked up to him shortly after, bringing my own plate and both our glasses with me. His gentle smile was a bit unnerving as he watched my moves intently while I placed the things carefully on top of his.

I turned around and picked up the salt and pepper shaker, focusing hard on my task as well as where I stepped. I hadn’t had an *incident* since we got home and I prayed it would stay this way for once.

“Today was your last day at the kindergarten, wasn’t it?”

My eyes glued to his, I nodded and put the salt and pepper onto one of the shelves without watching how far I shoved them to the back, only stopping when I heard a noisy clink. I flinched a little.

“So, you’re free now? All summer, right?”

“Uh-huh, yeah.” I nodded again, my stomach dropping. “I’m supposed to be thinking about what I want do next. The kindergarten asked me to come back if I’m willing to do some extra courses to get a degree. Or I could check out other places and save more money for college. But my head is so full, and I can’t think, can’t decide—”

Okay, stop. Talking. Now. He didn't ask what you wanted to do, only if you were free. Why was he asking if I was free?

"I get it, man. It sucks when your head is stuffed with all kinds of crap, and you're one second away from bursting into a million pieces," Tabby replied with a sympathetic smile, then paused, holding his breath for a long moment, eyes searching.

"Well, Harlie, I've had this idea... I think you'd like it. Do you want to help me clear my head too? Stuff's really hard to get rid of sometimes. We could help each other out, what do you say?"

Standing only a few feet away, Tabby paused for a heartbeat or two, watching me silently. The air felt charged as if there were absolutely no space between us. Like I couldn't breathe.

"Hey, you said you trust me," he said in his most gentle, sincere voice. "And I promise it'll be loads of fun. For both of us."

"Sure, yeah, of course," I said shakily because I was weak when it came to Tabby. When he looked at me like that, all sweet and innocent and a little hesitant, I couldn't say no if I wanted, which I didn't.

"Brilliant." Tabby grinned. "No chickening out now, promise?"

His brow did that adorable lift-but-not-really-lift, and I swallowed a big ass lump in my suddenly scratchy throat, nodding, despite my gut telling me to at least ask what he was planning before agreeing to anything. I'd probably still say yes if he did.

"Awesome!" Tabby patted my shoulder affectionately and beamed me another smile. Those deep-green eyes made me shiver and feel things I wasn't supposed to feel. "It'll be great, you'll see."

Then he disappeared into the hallway and left me to fill the dishwasher with our used plates, glasses, and cutlery.

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## Chapter Eight

“Tabby?”

“Up here!”

In my bedroom? Our apartment had a second floor, which only consisted of my room and a tiny storage closet. What was he looking for up there? Quickly, I crossed the living room and went up the stairs, carefully watching where I stepped.

“You need anything?” I asked into the room after stepping through the open door.

Oh my God. What was he doing? My bed, which was basically a futon mattress on top of a low stack of wooden pallets, was covered in clothes. *My clothes*. Tabby kneeling on the floor beside it, socks and underwear of all shapes and colors were piled in little mountains to his other side. *My underwear*. Oh. My. God!

I dropped to the floor and threw my arms over a pile of blue, green, black, and purple boxers, briefs, and equally colorful socks.

“What are you doing with my underwear?” I asked with a squeak, heat flooding my cheeks and neck.

Tabby looked at me like I’d just interrupted something very important, like I had disturbed him meditating or preparing for a life-changing assignment. There was not a hint of embarrassment or apology I’d hoped to see, considering he was going through my clothes, especially those that weren’t meant for prying eyes.

A flash of turquoise and purple caught my eye, sticking out from under my hand, and I let out yet another very, very immature squeak.

Tabby’s eyes followed mine, and he reached for the small item, tugging. Despite my efforts to keep it hidden, he managed to pull it out and waved the shiny, turquoise G-string in front of my flushed face.

“I had no idea you had a thing for daring underwear, Kiddo,” Tabby teased. “Look at this! Just. Wow.”

“Oh my God. Give it back! Tabby—!” I squeaked and wriggled and reached for my underwear but he was faster. Racing Tabby around my bedroom was

probably the weirdest thing that had ever happened to me. I'd always hoped when we ended up in a similar position we'd be dressed in fewer clothes. There went my wishful thinking.

When I grabbed him by his black leather belt, a few inches above his perfect, round ass, I realized where my hand was and flinched away. Tabby stumbled forward but caught himself on my nightstand. He turned with an evil grin. I sighed.

“What do you want, Tabby?”

“Me? Nothing. Did I embarrass you? I'm sorry. There's nothing to be embarrassed about,” he assured with a twinkle in his eyes, the corner of his lips lifting. His voice was rough and deep when he said, “They're kinda... hot.”

Tabby then threw the velvet G-string my way and quickly turned around, going back to picking through my stuff scattered across the floor. We made a bit of a mess with our jumping and running I noted. Stuffing the embarrassing piece of clothing in the back of my pants, I knelt down next to him.

“What are you planning on doing with my clothes?”

I felt a little irritated at the fact he'd snuck in here and emptied my closet just like that, like he was allowed to touch everything without asking. Was he looking for something?

“I'm packing. See?” Tabby pointed to a pile of socks, T-shirts and shorts—the one on top, green with black stripes. “We're taking those.”

“We?”

He ignored my question and pointed at another, smaller stack of black boxer briefs and colorful beanies, flashing me a grin, all white teeth and plump lips.

“I like these best,” Tabby said, that seemingly irrepressible twinkle still in his eyes. “But feel free to add any you want from that other pile over there.”

“Why, thank you. That's very considerate of you.”

“I knew you'd think so,” Tabby chuckled and threw a purple shirt over my head. When I pulled it off, unsure whether I should feel annoyed or amused, I found Tabby looking at me with that odd expression I still had no words for.

“Purple's your color, man. You should wear it more often.”

What I had words for was his smile, all gentle and soft again. It was adorable. Beautiful. Refreshing. Okay, apparently I had a million words for *that*.

“I’m sorry, but you have to help me out here. Why exactly are you packing my clothes?”

“We’re going on a road trip.”

“W-we are going to do what?” I sputtered.

“You, me, and a car. A trip. On the road. Just us two.”

Was he serious? The look on his face told me he was.

“What car?” I asked stupidly, remembering he’d arrived from New York by bus.

“I took my mom’s,” he replied with a cheeky grin. “After the funeral. That’s how I got back.”

“You stole your mom’s car?”

“What? No!” Tabby burst out in giggles, sounding and looking as amused and adorable as ever, his sandy hair flopping gracelessly into his eyes. I longed to reach out and brush it from his face.

“Geez, Harlie. We’ve got more than one car. She won’t even notice her Honda is gone, trust me.”

I nodded. Okay, so they had quite a lot of money then. Lewis never cared to share that little detail with me. I was starting to wonder what other things I didn’t know. Probably a lot.

“So, we’re going on a trip? To where? And why?”

“Let’s pack first, and talk in the car. I have a feeling we’ve got a lot of material to fill a few hours at least.”

Tabby stood and held out a hand to me, which I took. I let him pull me to my feet and cursed myself for being so reckless. He’d pulled too hard, perhaps underestimating his own strength, and now I was standing way too close, my knees nearly touching his.

“You’ve got some tomato sauce on your face,” Tabby whispered, his eyes unfocused, switching from mine to my nose and lips and back.

“Where?” I asked dumbly, my heart stuttering.

“Right. There.”

Tabby’s hand suddenly appeared before my eyes, a little blurry and too close so I squinted, then I watched him reach out, but the gentle poke of his

finger at the corner of my mouth caused me to close them again. I squeezed my eyes shut, hard, while he brushed his thumb, a little up and down, then half across my lower lip.

When I dared to look again, my eyelids were fluttering a bit, and Tabby was gazing down at me intently. The green in his eyes was dark and pretty, like sea grass at the bottom of the ocean. I swallowed a lump in my throat, and for a moment I thought he might actually suck his thumb into his mouth and clean off the sauce, but instead Tabby wiped it on his pant leg.

“Can you bring us a small suitcase or backpack? Oh, and you might want to pick out a sweatshirt or jacket, I hadn’t gotten that far yet.”

Tabby flashed a toothy smile and, as if nothing happened, turned around and started putting some of the clothes, which I guessed he didn’t want to bring, back into my closet.

*Holy heavens above. What in the name of love is happening?*

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## Chapter Nine

“We’re going on a road trip.”

I kept repeating Tabby’s words in my mind, over and over, but they didn’t seem any more real than when he’d spoken them the first time. We were sitting in his mom’s cherry-red Honda, and I was fidgeting with the seat belt. It had taken us another half an hour to finish packing, leaving Lewis a note and grabbing some drinks and snacks to go. The rain was still pattering onto the windshield, soft but insistent, leaving grimy puddles on the street and sidewalk.

It had gotten a little cold, and I shivered, despite wearing my white windbreaker. It hadn’t even occurred to me to ask why exactly we had to drive anywhere at this time of the night. Sure, it wasn’t that late but the sun had gone down a while ago, and it would be useless going anywhere when there would be nothing to do. Shops, restaurants and everything else besides perhaps a club or two would be closed.

“Where do you wanna go? Pick a place, whatever strikes your fancy.”

Tabby rested his hands on the steering wheel and sent me an inquiring glance.

“Like what? A club? Places are going to close down for the night.”

To my surprise, Tabby chuckled, the sound sweet and bouncing off the windows of the car, where we were still parked across from my building.

“No, silly, tell me a city you wanna visit. Hell, better yet give me a state. Something cool. Fun. Anywhere but here.”

He wanted to leave Allentown? Pennsylvania even?

Right, we *did* pack a bunch of clothes and stuff, I’d totally forgotten! Somehow I still couldn’t believe he wanted to go on an actual road trip though.

“I’ll drive us wherever you want to go,” Tabby promised.

“You don’t care where?”

“Nope,” Tabby assured, smiling. “Well, you might want to keep it within the country, please. We might not have enough time to go international. At least not by car.”

“Okay.” I chuckled, pulling nervously at the seat belt. “Sure, I can do that.”

If he wanted a state I would give him one. I studied my mental map of the states and ruled out the places that were on the other side of the country.

“Florida. I always wanted to visit Miami or Orlando. See the beach, go to touristy places and such things.”

“Good choice.” Tabby beamed. “Florida it is.”

“Really? Just like that?”

I couldn’t believe he would drive us to Florida in the middle of the night. That was like what, two days away?

“Yep, just like that.” Tabby winked at me, and I probably blushed just a little more. “It helps that we have a beach house in Miami Beach. So, yeah. Perfect choice for a little getaway, Kiddo. It’ll be awesome.”

“Wow. Uh. I don’t know what to say. We’re just going to drive all the way to Florida? I can’t believe you wanna do that. Thank—”

“Harlie?”

“Yeah?” I croaked, surprised when Tabby’s hand suddenly moved toward me until it was resting on top of my knee.

“Just sit back, relax.” A squeeze, and I froze. “Put on some music and be happy. That’s all I need. I don’t want a thank you, okay? Just be yourself.” Tabby smiled and carefully removed his hand, the pressure of his fingers a physical memory in the skin under the thin layer of clothes.

I nodded. I could do that. Thankful that I brought my USB connector in my backpack, I plugged in my phone and selected a playlist I liked to listen to while commuting on the bus. Quickly the addicting beat of Adam Lambert’s “If I Had You” filled the confines of the small car and I couldn’t stop myself from humming along.

The idea of riding several hours in the car with Tabby had me feeling all giddy and excited, and I was smiling to myself like a fool as we were driving past the city limits and out onto the highway, watching the scenery pass by in a blur. As much as I was looking forward to seeing other cities and the beach, I couldn’t help but bask in the awesomeness of being close to Tabby like a cat in the sun.

“How long will we be gone for?” I asked between a yawn and singing along to the chorus of another Adam Lambert song.



“For as long as we want to,” Tabby said with an excited grin. “We have all summer, right?”

I wasn’t sure if it was a smart idea to simply drive off with Tabby when he was obviously a little off his game right now. He’d just lost an old school friend and wouldn’t talk about why he returned the same day he’d left, but if going away for a while would help him then who was I to say no?

The fact that he’d asked me to come along had me walking on air.

A couple of hours into driving I became extremely tired, the kind of tired where I could hardly keep my eyes from closing.

“And you honestly don’t mind driving all night?”

Tabby had assured me a few times that he’d be fine, but I couldn’t shake the feeling he was getting tired too. He definitely looked it and our conversation had died down a while ago in favor of listening to music.

“I’m good,” Tabby promised. “Since we will be passing through Virginia, North and South Carolina, as well as Georgia, depending on how fast we want to go, we can stop at tourist sites along the way.” Tabby beamed. “It’ll be fun, you’ll see!”

That sounded fantastic, but...

“It’s really a long way, Tabby,” I pointed out. “Maybe we should just stay somewhere in Virginia. They must have great vacation spots there. We could go camping? Or maybe not,” I sighed. “We didn’t bring any camping gear.”

“You wanted to go to Florida, so that’s where we’ll be going,” Tabby countered, and I didn’t have it in me to argue the matter. If he said it would be okay, it would be, right?

“Okay,” I spoke on a yawn. “Wake me when we arrive somewhere?”

Tabby chuckled and patted my leg. “Will do, Kiddo. Now sleep.”

And so I did.

Tabby jerked me awake when we stopped at a deserted parking lot in a strange city.

“Where are we?” I asked, straightening in my seat. My body hurt in the weirdest places, one of them being my right ass-cheek, and my jacket had gotten caught in the seat belt. I tugged at it irritably.

“We just got into Rockville, Maryland,” Tabby said, sounding way too cheerful.

The bright green lights on the dashboard informed me it was just after midnight.

“There is nothing to see around here, but we can find a motel and check in for the night. I thought you might like to spend the day hanging out in D.C. tomorrow,” Tabby chimed. “It’s such a cool city! I thought you might like seeing it, uh, unless you’ve been here before, of course, then we can just keep driving. Maybe I should have asked first, but I didn’t want to wake you.”

Yeah, he was definitely too cheerful for this time of night.

“No, that’s cool. I haven’t been to D.C.,” I clarified. With a yawn escaping, I rubbed my sleepy eyes and glanced out the window. Everything was dark, save for a couple of yellowish street lamps and a deserted gas station in the distance. “Actually, I haven’t been anywhere besides Pennsylvania and New York, if you can believe that.”

“Then we’re staying.” Tabby gave me one of those wicked sweet smiles that made my stomach flop. “Not here in the parking lot, of course,” he chuckled and started up the car again.

I waited by the Honda in a large parking lot while Tabby got us a room at the motel we stopped at a few minutes later. The older building was tall, painted an ugly mud brown with a white roof but not too shabby looking from the outside. Tabby insisted on doing it all himself—choosing, paying—and I was more than happy letting him play our tour guide.

I could hardly argue, since I hadn’t brought much cash, and my credit card was neatly put away in my wallet, which I left behind, thinking a few notes, my keys, and phone would do for the night. Stupid, I know. I should have remembered the whole road trip thing!

Tabby assured me it wouldn’t be a problem and I could pay him back some time if I really felt like I needed to. Which I did. I was planning on writing down all my expenses.

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## Chapter Ten

Morning arrived fast, and I bounded out of bed and straight into the shower with a wide smile on my lips, feeling incredibly relaxed after sleeping like a baby. I wasn't the most cheerful riser, but the pure excitement of our trip had me up and about earlier than I would've ever gotten up on a day off. Seemed like there was nothing more motivating than the simple knowledge of spending another day with Tabby.

The room we'd slept in was tiny; a narrow single bed on each side plus a crooked bistro-sized table and two chairs in the center, the furniture and 32 inch Samsung CRT TV clearly outdated. Everything smelled strongly like lavender, except for the bathroom, which reeked of something icky, rotten, and absolutely disgusting.

After throwing on a pair of black denim shorts and a light green tee, I snuck over to the far end of the room where Tabby was still wrapped up in a heavy white comforter, sleeping soundly. A thick wave of darkened, damp hair was plastered to his forehead and oh, the soft little sounds of snuffling he made were extremely endearing. The night before, after he'd fallen asleep, I'd been lying awake a little longer, just listening to his soft snoring and light breathing.

"Tabby...? Come on, get up. I'm bored," I whispered and poked his shoulder a few times until he stirred. Tabby's eyes fluttered, and he stretched, yawning when he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I assured him, a small chuckle slipping from my lips. "Just thought I'd wake you, instead of watching you sleep like some creep." It had crossed my mind.

Tabby untangled himself from his blanket and moved into a sitting position, blinking rapidly at me as if to make sure he was truly seeing what he thought he was seeing.

"Thank you, that's very considerate of you," he said sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

Damn, you adorable bastard. The corners of his lips lifted in a slow, sweet smile that sent my heart racing. I turned quickly to give him some space, hoping he'd get up and we could get going soon. The urge to stare like a creep was huge, but I thought that wouldn't be very welcome behavior, so I forced

myself to move out of the way. I quickly got distracted checking my e-mails and other notifications on my phone.

We left the motel at the first rays of sunshine coming in through the dusty blinds in favor of finding breakfast, preferably with lots of coffee and pancakes. I was craving pancakes with syrup so bad I would've walked fifty miles for a plate of fluffy heavenliness. Maybe.

While I gathered our things and piled them into the Honda, Tabby went back to grab some touristy fliers at the small shop next to the motel. I didn't have to wait long before he returned, walking toward me with a bright smile and waving a bunch of colorful papers around like an overly excited kid. God, his cheerfulness got my heart racing every damn time.

I must've stared, but there was no way I would've managed to look away if my life depended on it. Tabby was dressed in a tight, very tight, light blue denim button-up shirt, loose green-beige camouflage shorts and white high top Converse. What especially caught my eye when he flashed me his thousand-watt smile, looking as stunning as ever, was the silver chain disappearing into his shirt.

"Come on, let's go." Tabby reached in his pocket and pulled out a pair of golden-brown sunglasses, motioning for me to follow. "The lady said there's a decent diner not far from here. I think we gotta go straight and turn on Powers Lane."

It didn't take us long to find Tabby's diner of choice, Cherry Lady's Diner, where we filled our growling stomachs with a big, hearty breakfast. There was so much food laid out in front of us, I couldn't believe we managed to munch down half of it in a matter of minutes.

In between sipping on my coffee and devouring the fluffiest pancakes I'd tasted in a long time, I decided to bring up the question Tabby'd been avoiding for some reason. A part of me was too curious to just let it go. As it was I was still trying to figure out how exactly we ended up on this trip and its purpose, but stubborn as he was, he wouldn't tell me that either.

"So, why did you come back so fast? It was a surprise finding you on my doorstep, you know. I thought you'd be gone for the rest of the week." *And that I probably wouldn't see you again all summer.*

Tabby seemed to be contemplating my question for a long moment before saying, "Sounds a little like I'm a lost puppy, huh?"

“You’re not as lost as you might think.”

Ugh. What was I saying? Shut up, idiot. I didn’t even make sense.

Tabby’s eyes twinkled for a brief moment, then his expression darkened slightly, his brows furrowing.

“I had an argument with my mom, after I got back from the funeral. It’s nothing new, but I couldn’t deal with her and all the crap she likes to give me. I felt like my walls were closing in, you know? I’d just found out one of my friends got killed in a friggin’ car accident. The last thing I wanted was to get into one argument after the other, so I bolted.”

I realized I had not the slightest clue what Tabby’s family was like, where he lived and whom he grew up with. I knew they lived in a smaller town about an hour and a half over the border from Pennsylvania, but that was it. I’ve always had a huge, huge crush on him, and we’d spent some time together, true, but always with Lewis and some of our friends. I’d never had the chance to get to know Tabby on a personal level, and knowing that this might be the only chance I’d get, I decided to make the most of it.

“I guess I don’t know anything about your family, huh? I didn’t imagine you’d have a rocky relationship with your mom. I mean, you just don’t seem to have those kinds of problems.”

I knew it was lame, but I always thought he was perfect in everything he did.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tabby chuckled. I could only shrug. Whatever I felt like saying would only sound stupid, it did even in my own head.

“It’s not so bad. My dad’s okay but he’s gone most of the time, working for some bank, always traveling. We never had a close relationship. I hardly saw him growing up, and I still don’t. My mom isn’t all that bad either, she just doesn’t approve of anything I do and doesn’t hesitate telling me just how much it displeases her.”

Tabby laughed and my eyes fixated on his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“I think they’re having a secret bet going on or something. I can’t tell who is unhappier with my life choices, my dad or my mom. They’re always up in my face about literally everything.”

I didn’t have a response to that so I stayed quiet, nodded where it seemed appropriate, and listened to Tabby’s dreamy voice. Was it wrong to enjoy

listening to his story? I was captivated by the way he licked his full lower lip in between sentences and how intense his voice grew when he talked about his folks. Feeling bad for knowing his parents weren't so easy to deal with, and bringing up such an unpleasant topic, I hoped he'd end this on a happier note.

"She constantly goes on about how my career path is ruining the family's name and how not having a wife already makes her like look like a bad mother to her country club friends. I mean, I'm only twenty-five years old, what is she expecting anyway?" Tabby let out a low sigh, and I could only watch, hoping my brain would catch up, because I felt a bit lost right now.

"I... I don't think I understand," I confessed, trying to find a way to put what I wanted to say without sounding like an ass. "They're not proud of you? Of what you've achieved?" I couldn't believe anyone not being proud of having a son like Tabby.

"What? My silly attempt of a nonexistent career?" Tabby scoffed, a frown distorting his pretty face.

"What are you talking about? I've seen what you do. You're incredible on stage!" I praised, feeling my cheeks getting hotter. I didn't care though; I wanted him to know. "And you love the theater. It shows, you know. How can they not love seeing you perform?"

Unexpectedly, Tabby's cheeks flushed bright red, and he sipped on his pink milkshake to hide a fleeting, embarrassed smile. It didn't work, the action making me focus on his lips even more.

"Well, they see it more as a way for me to *play* instead of doing actual work. Dad just loves telling me I should already grow up and stop pretending I was someone else. They absolutely despise my career path."

I gave a halfhearted curse, feeling absolutely astounded. Tabby shook his head and smiled ruefully.

"It is funny, though, listening to them complain," Tabby went on. He chuckled, but I could tell it was forced. "You should see my mother's face when she's all riled up, her round face all red, and she's always one second away from crying. She just loves making it all about herself. Whatever it is."

"But it... hurts. Doesn't it?" I asked carefully. I thought I knew how he might feel.

Our eyes locked and for a moment I thought I might have said the wrong thing. Tabby let out a long breath and nodded.

“Yeah, honestly, it sucks,” he huffed and closed his eyes.

We were quiet for a long moment before Tabby chuckled a little evilly, and I’d never heard anything as cute.

“You know she can’t even complain about not having grandchildren yet, because there’s still Lewis and my sister Shannon. My mother is a complete lunatic sometimes. Most of her drama doesn’t even make sense. Not to someone with a clear mind and a healthy sense of wrong and right, important and not important. I’m not the wacky one only because I won’t get married and flaunt a pretty little wife around like some trophy. They’re so old fashioned.”

What was he saying? He couldn’t mean...

“Why don’t you want to get married?”

“Oh, no. Weddings are cool.” Tabby clarified, grinning, soft dimples adorning his cheeks. “I’ve got nothing against getting married, really. It just won’t happen anytime soon, and I’m not exactly a womanizer, you know what I mean?”

What was he saying? There was no way in hell Tabby wasn’t popular with the ladies. He was gorgeous! And sweet and... Oh. I realized I’d never heard him mention a girlfriend or seen him being anything but platonically friendly with his female friends. Could that mean he and I had more in common than I’d ever dared hope?

“Uh, I’m not sure I’m following...”

“I don’t think you’re having any trouble following, Harlie.” Tabby smirked, his hair falling across his eyes when he leaned forward. “I’ll give you another hint: I’m not as interested in women as my parents would like me to.”

No way!

“Do you mean. Are you saying you are... gay?” I whispered, as if sharing a dirty secret. Holy shit, I was being totally ridiculous. But my heart was beating so fast and hard, having a dizzying effect on me.

Tabby leaned closer, half across the table now, elbows spread wide apart. “Very much so, I’m afraid,” Tabby confided. He also whispered and pinched his brows together in a frown. “Will that be a problem for you, Harlie?”

Tabby lifted one sandy eyebrow, and I swallowed hard.

“I... Oh. Of course not! That... that would be stupid,” I stammered and wished the ground would split open and swallow me whole. But when does that ever happen?

Tabby leaned back against the soft cushion of the booth, glaring at me with a look I'd never seen before. I had to admit, it scared me a little. A moment later the corners of his lips twitched, and he burst out laughing.

Idiot.

"That's good. Really good," Tabby chimed and took a drink of his milkshake, wiped his foamy lip with the back of his hand and smiled gently. "I hoped it wouldn't bother you."

"Of course it doesn't," I assured and decided to just come out with what I never dared to announce in front of him. "I'm kinda, you know, gay too."

Tabby grinned, biting his lips, and I could tell he was suppressing another laughing fit. Ugh. I wanted to smack my head on the table in front of me. Smooth, Harlie. Very smooth. You're such a charmer.

"I know," Tabby stated casually.

Say what?

"You knew?" I started. "How? S-since when?" How could he have possibly known?

"Do you remember Braden? The tall, very athletic dark-haired guy I introduced you to—when was it? That third, no second weekend we met, when you and Lewis came down to New York for the fall festival?"

Of course I remembered.

Nodding, I asked, "Yeah, uh, what about him?"

That was over a year ago. A chill crawled up my spine. Had Tabby known ever since?

Tabby leaned back against the cushioned seat, taking his drink with him. He was watching me curiously, and I wondered where in hell he was going with this.

"Braden, he recognized you," he clarified, sipping on his strawberry milkshake.

"What? How's that possible?" I burst out, trying to get my head around this conversation. "We hadn't met before!"

"Yeah, he told me that too," Tabby confirmed. "He said he'd seen you at a gay bar down in Philadelphia a couple of months earlier that year—you know,



his parents still live there and he visits a lot—and apparently you were *really* into some cute twink or something. I didn't ask for any details."

Wow, talk about weird.

"Don't you think it's possible that he was making it up, or maybe confusing me with someone else?" I asked, knowing that Braden had very likely been telling the truth. I had been to a club slash bar for the "18+ gay-friendly crowd" a few times with a friend I met online. It had been a fun experience, but not enough for it to become a regular thing. I wasn't into big crowds and never had been.

"I don't know Harlie, what do *you* think?" Tabby leaned in closer and touched my arm. "You've never been to a gay bar in Philly? No? You know, if you say so, I'll believe you more than Braden."

My pulse started racing, and I wondered if I was dreaming. We couldn't be having this conversation!

"No, I mean yes, Tabby, I might have been to a gay bar in Philadelphia before," I admitted. "Probably because, uh, I *am* gay, and it seems like a fun place to go when you are, you know, gay."

Tabby's eyes twinkled, his lips twitching, and I was surprised to realize that I felt as amused as he looked. A sudden wave of relief hit me hard. It was finally out in the open. Tabby knew I was gay, and wow, he was too! How could I have not caught on?

"Perhaps your friend was right, I don't know." I shrugged. "I don't remember seeing him there or anywhere before, though."

Tabby smiled like he'd just won a prize.

"Why didn't you ever tell Lewis?" he asked curiously.

"It's never come up? I mean I don't bring guys back to the apartment or go out on dates and such. No boyfriend to introduce to my roommate, you know?"

Lewis was a great guy, for the most part, so I wasn't exactly worried about coming out to him, I just never felt it was necessary. Being gay didn't define who I was, and until I had a valid reason to tell him, like a boyfriend, I wasn't planning on bringing it up. But since I didn't see that happening in the near future, who knew when there'd be time for that particular conversation. If ever.

I never went home with anyone, and honestly, the closest I'd gotten in doing anything with a guy was trading a bunch of awkward kisses and the odd hand

job in a bathroom stall. Yuck. That quickly became one of my least favorite things to do. I soon realized that I wasn't into fooling around with guys I scarcely knew. It would've been nice if I'd met someone I'd actually wanted to get to know, but no such luck.

"You don't date?" Tabby's gentle voice startled me.

"Um, I'm not against it or anything." I grimaced, waving my hand around awkwardly. "But no, uh, I don't date."

"How come?"

"Haven't met anyone that mattered," I said, hoping it sounded better than saying I'd never met anyone I thought was worth my time. "Or anyone who doesn't think I'm a pathetic mess." That sadly was another truth.

"What are you talking about?" Tabby asked, raising his voice slightly. "Why would anyone think that?"

"You have met me, right? Ballerina on crack. Butterfingers extraordinaire. Stoned monkey with two left feet. And the list is never ending in case you haven't noticed."

"Don't do that, Harlie." Tabby glared at me across the table. "I mean it. Don't talk about yourself that way."

"Why? It's true." I let out a dramatic sigh and reached for my drink, wishing it was spiked with lots of vodka. I hated thinking about my clumsiness, but talking about it always seemed to trigger a small disaster, and I really didn't want that.

"It isn't true! And I can't stand listening to you talking yourself down like that."

I tried steering the conversation away, asking, "Does Lewis know about you?"

"Yeah." Tabby continued glaring at me, which should've been annoying, instead I found it super adorable. I couldn't get mad at him if I wanted.

"Do you think he suspects anything about me?" Sometimes I wondered if he did, considering I never mentioned a girl, girlfriend or joined in on any girl related talk when we were with his friends.

"I don't know, Kiddo. I don't think so though, he never said a word to me."

I cringed and Tabby smiled wickedly.

“There it is! You got that look again.” Tabby chuckled and kicked my foot under the table, gently enough that it didn’t hurt. “Are you all right?” he asked teasingly, kicking my foot again.

Once. Twice. I felt my cheeks getting all hot and undoubtedly annoyingly red again.

“I... yeah. All good.”

Tabby laughed harder now, still kicking my foot. Damn, what was wrong with this guy? I hadn’t known he had all those weird-ass mood swings and childish behaviors in him. I loved it.

“You don’t like it when I call you that, do you?” Tabby asked with obvious humor in his voice. “I can tell by the way your eyes twitch every time.”

“Are you being serious?” I barked exasperated. “I’ve always wanted to ask why you call me that, but I... you know. Never mind.”

Tabby snickered a little evilly, and I kicked him back this time, which only made him laugh even harder.

“I’m not the only one who decided on a nickname,” Tabby countered. “Instead of using my real name, you always call me Tabby. It’s Tab, Harlie, not Tabby.” With a hand covering his heart, he made a show of being hurt. Leaning forward, he gave me those big puppy-dog-eyes, trying to pull off a look of innocence. “It’s not that difficult to remember, is it?”

Damn. How could he possibly look so ridiculous and adorable at the same time?

“But ‘Kiddo’? Seriously?” I huffed. I wasn’t going to admit that I thought “Tabby” sounded too cute for words. “That’s got to be the worst nickname you could’ve come up with!”

Okay, it might not have been my smartest move to continue complaining like a kid.

“Hey, you call me by the name of a cat!” Tabby retorted, throwing his hand in the air. He then grinned and kicked my foot under the table again, adding, “But you don’t see me complaining, do you?”

“It’s not a cat name,” I mumbled, fidgeting with the table cloth and feeling abashed. Maybe it was a cat name, sort of. I still didn’t think it was completely justified that I got stuck with the worst nickname in history.

“I’m sorry,” Tabby apologized, his eyes sparkling with mischief. After a heartbeat he added, “It’s just so funny; the way your face goes all wrinkly and shit when I say it, and God help me, I love saying it,” he admitted with a wide grin.

Yeah. He definitely wasn’t sorry at all.

“I never thought I would say this, but you can be a bit of a jerk, Tabby.”

To my surprise, or not so much to my surprise I guess, Tabby simply laughed it off and distracted me with one of those pretty smiles that made me all melty inside. Grumbling to myself, I finished my coffee, waiting for Tabby do the same so we could get going.

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## Chapter Eleven

We'd just crossed the state line into Virginia. The road flew by—for miles and miles—trees and cars had been the only scenery to admire. The day before yesterday, after breakfast, we took the Metro into D.C. and spent the entire day sightseeing like some attraction-starved tourists.

Our first stop had been the Museum of Natural History, where we spent nearly half the day wandering around. We picked up sandwiches and had a late lunch in the park by the National Mall, feeding squirrels and enjoying the sunshine before checking out the Washington Monument, the U.S. Capitol Building, and Lincoln Memorial. Before sundown we took pictures in front of the White House.

Since there were hardly enough hours in the day to squeeze in all the things to do and see spread throughout the city, we decided to spend another day in the area. Then yesterday, we went to the Smithsonian Museums, which I really wanted to see after reading about them in one of Tabby's fliers, and spent the rest of the day walking through Georgetown.

Needless to say, it had been the most awesome two days I had had in a long, long time.

I focused my attention back to the smart phone in my hands. I'd kicked off my flip-flops hours ago, my feet resting against the dashboard, the latest Fall Out Boy songs blasting through the speakers. I'd been looking up things to do and places to go, browsing various web sites for a while now, but coming up short so far. Oh wait, I think I just found something good.

"Hey Tab, there's some kind of festival going on in a town—Clarksville—by the lake. Looks like there'll be a band and food and all kinds of festival-y things. You wanna check it out?"

"Absolutely! Sounds fun," Tabby said cheerfully, then turned to flash me a quick smile. "You're awesome with that finding stuff to do thing. Feed my phone the directions please, will you?"

"Sure." I quickly typed in the info in the GPS app on Tabby's phone then relaxed back into my seat, smiling. I wished we could stay on the road like this forever. Drive all the way to the Golden Coast, maybe even take Route 66. Traveling across the U.S. sounded exciting, but I wouldn't have thought being

stuck in a car for hours could be *that* exciting. I was sure it had a lot to do with my current company.

The easy driving on country roads—little to no traffic—allowed me to fully enjoy the view, both outside the car and inside. The rising July sun shimmered through the tall trees, creating a beautiful play of lights and colors across Tabby’s relaxed, half-smiling face. I wondered what was on his mind that had him looking sort of happy, and completely at ease. Was there maybe someone he was thinking about? Or was he remembering something nice?

“Tell me about your internship.” Tabby gave me an encouraging smile. “Why kindergarten?”

Uh, that question caught me completely off guard.

“Kids are awesome, special,” I said easily. It was true and a big part of why I liked being part of a kindergarten group. “Working with kids is inspiring, and they never fail to lift my mood. Kids don’t judge you, and they don’t care how clumsy I am. I can spill stuff or trip over my feet and they’re okay with it. I don’t get mean comments or laughed at. It’s nice to feel like everyone else.”

“Are people really giving you such a hard time? I can’t believe anyone would be mean to you because you’re a little clumsy sometimes. I mean, come on, everyone has those moments.”

Tabby sounded fierce and protective, and the tone of his voice was something I hadn’t heard before. It stirred all kinds of emotions in me, and it was difficult to see through the fog in my brain just then.

“Well, you have met me. I’m *constantly* all thumbs, not just sometimes.” I took a deep breath and forced my pulse to slow down. “You have no idea what some people are capable of. They see something amusing and don’t hold back.” I didn’t want pity, but people’s fondness of making fun of others was frustrating.

“That’s no reason to treat anyone differently. Someone should teach them a lesson.”

“True but that’s just how people are, and I’m used to it I guess. I can’t blame them for finding it amusing.” I shook my head and held up a hand when Tabby opened his mouth to argue.

“There’s another thing I love about teaching those little ones,” I said fondly, steering the conversation to the more brilliant things in life. “Adults see things

right or left, forward or backward. Children see sideways and diagonal and upside down. Where we see black and white, children see lights and colors.”

Tabby hummed. “You’re incredible, Harlie.”

His voice was all dreamy just then, and I wanted to argue, that no I wasn’t, but couldn’t bring myself to voice any response whatsoever. I risked a glance at Tabby, and to my surprise he looked gratifyingly impressed. He was also watching me just as I’d thought he might. There was a certain sweetness in his eyes that made me want to reach out and touch him.

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Once we got into Clarksville, it was easy to find the lake and spot the festival location. We drove around a while longer until we found a nice little motel close to the lakeside and checked in. Tabby got showered and changed first, and when it was my turn, I took my set of clothes with me into the small bathroom.

After washing off the grimy feeling of being stuck inside a car for hours, I slipped into a fresh pair of boxer briefs—red with a golden band—my favorite dark jeans and a plain white tee. Back in the bedroom I found one of my favorite beanies—white with golden studs—in one of the backpacks we brought and put it on, in a weak attempt to look at least a tiny bit fashionable.

When my gaze sought and found Tabby, my heart almost stopped. He looked stunning in a navy blue dress-shirt and dark, ripped denim shorts. The top buttons of his shirt were undone, exposing a white undershirt and bits of his silver chain. And he had on those ridiculously cool brown leather Converse, making the getup beyond heart-stopping hot.

“Do you want to check out that diner or the taco place we passed on the way?” I asked, stepping closer and forcing myself to look away, finding my sneakers sticking out from under Tabby’s brown leather bag.

Tabby hummed, contemplating my question. When I looked up I found him grinning at me. The aviator shades he wore looked good on him. Sexy and commanding. And in combination with his wet hair, insanely hot.

“I vote for pasta.”

“Again?”

I didn’t think anyone could love pasta more than Tabby. He seemed to worship the God of Pasta. I should get him a T-shirt. The thought made me chuckle.

“Life is a combination of magic and pasta.” Tabby’s voice was throaty and warm, sending millions of little shivers down my spine. “A day without pasta is a day not lived. A wasted day.”

“Okay, stop it, dork.” I took Tabby’s arm and pulled him along. “We’ll find you some pasta. Every day if you like. Happy?”

“How could I not be?” Tabby’s eyes met mine and he winked, causing me to blush. Again. “We’re away from home and all the stress. I have pasta to look forward to and you hanging off my arm. Couldn’t be more perfect if you ask me.”

I must’ve swallowed my tongue, again, because I had no smart response. Not that I ever had, but my ability to articulate, or think, always left me when he had his flirty moments. I had no clue how to do this without giving away that I liked him so much it hurt. I couldn’t tell him, could I? Now that I knew he wasn’t interested in women any more than I was, I might have a chance... No way, he was my friend’s older brother for crying out loud. I was a little afraid of the awkwardness it would most definitely cause.

Soon enough we found a small place that looked Italian, only a few streets away from our motel, and after making sure they actually had pasta on the menu we’d found our lunch provider for the day. The restaurant was narrow and crowded, buzzing with color and people, various spicy scents lingering in the air.

A middle-aged Mediterranean-looking waiter took our order and brought us each a glass of sparkling water. I decided to go with Scarpetta’s spaghetti while Tabby chose penne with some white, creamy sauce overflowing with mushrooms and greens I couldn’t name.

The music was catchy, the staff friendly, and everything was perfect until it happened. Realizing I’d just dropped a big dollop of tomato sauce, I looked down my white shirt and to my horror found a lake of red staining the center of my chest. The only surprise in that was that it hadn’t happened earlier.

“Not again,” I muttered annoyed and rubbed a paper napkin over it, despite knowing it wouldn’t matter. The damn sauce wouldn’t magically disappear. Some of it dripped down onto my lap, but thankfully it wouldn’t show as much on the dark denim. I added a few halfhearted choice words before excusing myself to the bathroom. I heard Tabby calling after me, but I ignored him. He must be so embarrassed being seen with me.



I headed straight for the sink and splashed some water onto my jeans, then rubbed my shirt some more with paper towels. As expected, it looked as bad as before. It was no use, so I decided to give up. The water I sprinkled on my face was refreshingly cold, and I hoped it would bring down the heat on my skin fast. I cringed at my reflection in the mirror. Damn, I looked awful.

Big pearls of water were framing my brown eyes, sticking my lashes together, and more droplets were running down my cherry-red cheeks, making them look chubbier than they actually were. I hoped. Wet dark curls were sticking messily out of my beanie, and the angry stain of tomato sauce in the center of my chest perfected my blubbery two-year-old fashion. I looked like I'd just been scolded for ruining yet another nice Sunday shirt.

Feeling utterly frustrated, I pulled off my beanie and angrily ran my fingers through my damp hair until not a single strand would stick out from under the hat. Then I dried my face and went to take care of business while I was already there.

When I returned to our table, Tabby was frowning into his half-empty plate, not eating. I sat back down opposite from him and mumbled some weak apology for interrupting our lunch. I planned on staying quiet and embarrassed for the rest of the meal. I hated how something like this *had* to happen all the damn time.

“Hey, Harlie?” Tabby eventually broke the awkward silence.

“Yeah?” I whispered, almost not daring to look up. My cheeks were now blazing like a wildfire, and I thought I could feel a hundred eyes on me, the clatter of dishes and loud conversations echoing through the noisy room.

“You know, I think it’s super adorable when you spill food all over yourself.”

Tabby chuckled then and flashed me one of his most blinding smiles. It was an effort to lift my quickly souring mood, and I appreciated it. It helped a little too.

“There’s something seriously wrong with you,” I said, a little amused despite everything, and absentmindedly ran my fingers over my stained shirt.

“I’m totally okay with that as long as you still like me, Harlie Kingston.”

“Oh I like you, all right.”

Quickly I forgot all about the stain and my embarrassment and continued eating. I couldn't even be upset about Tabby's teasing. For some reason nothing he said or did would upset me in any way.

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## Chapter Twelve

After lunch and a stroll around the rather small town, we decided to check out the riverside festival, which was less than a ten-minute walk away. On the way there, I bought a cheap touristy T-shirt that had the name of the town printed in white on purple fabric, and changed into it in the back of the shop. I didn't want us to go all the way to our car, and a souvenir wasn't such a bad idea. I could always wear it to bed.

The festival was slowly starting to fill by the time we arrived. Tabby fetched us drinks and a bucket of sweet popcorn while I found a spot in the sun. Families with their children and groups of teenagers were crowding around the game booths and food stands. There were even a bunch of rides for the small ones and a cool live band entertaining the older crowd. It was a lot of fun.

Later that afternoon we were huddled close on a park bench, sipping on spiked Mountain Dew. The air was a little humid but so wonderfully fresh today with the sun shining down on us nice and warm, not too hot and without burning skin. The sky was immensely blue, white silvery clouds changing their shape as they glided almost imperceptibly against it. I could even hear grasshoppers clicking all around us.

I was watching Tabby browsing tonight's program. The occasional breeze ruffled his hair, and I stared dreamily at him, getting lost in counting the birthmarks on his lip and cheek. Some were on his neck and right behind his ear. Tiny but noticeable if you were looking for them.

"Hey, look. There'll be fireworks at ten down by the river," Tabby announced cheerfully.

"Oh, cool. I love fireworks!" I admitted, grinning wide when he flashed me a smile.

"Think it would be a good idea if I'll go get us a blanket from the car," Tabby insisted and slowly stood. He handed me his half-empty cup and patted my shoulder. "Why don't you find us a place where we can watch the show?"

"Sure," I agreed and watched him walk away.

While Tabby went back to the car, I secured us the perfect spot for viewing the fireworks display under a tall tree, close to the lake away from all the buzz. I hoped it would stay a little secluded once it got dark.

I was watching the sun going down across the sparkling blue water stretching out in front of us, finishing off the hot dog we'd gotten from one of the booths for dinner, while Tabby was in the middle of telling a story from one of his acting classes, leaning against the tree, his shoulder touching mine. Around us, tiny bees, colorful butterflies and other insects flew among the flowers in search of their own food. Birds chirped cheerfully, people laughed and some feel-good pop-rock music could be heard from close by.

Tabby chuckled at the joke he was telling, one he'd heard from his friend Liza recently, and I laughed along, loving how dreamy Tabby looked bathed in the humid light of the sinking sun, and enjoying the warmth and butterflies filling up my stomach.

"Hey, Tab. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." Tabby bumped my shoulder with his. "Spill it, Kiddo," he prompted with clear amusement in his voice, the gentle kind I enjoyed hearing so much.

I took a deep breath and asked, "If you knew that I was, you know, gay for so long, why did you never say anything?" It had been nagging at the back of my brain all day.

I watched Tabby closely but didn't pick up the slightest clues of uneasiness or surprise on his face. He was half smiling, his expression relaxed. Huh. Tabby seemed pleased even.

"Ah, well, for one, it didn't feel right confronting you out of the blue, saying that I suspect you being gay. You know how it is. I didn't know if you were comfortable with it, being gay and all, since obviously Lewis didn't know. I thought there might be a reason for you wanting to keep it secret and I respected that."

Tabby's deep-green eyes locked onto mine, and he chuckled almost nervously. Leaning closer, he whispered, "Then there was the thing with me having an incredibly huge crush on you. It scared me some."

My heart skipped a beat, and I felt confusion and shock, then excitement and nervousness washing over me like a bone-crushing tidal wave. I couldn't believe my ears.

Tabby had... a crush on me?

"I knew it would only turn weird or awkward if I told you, with you being my brother's roommate and all. You know he's one of my closest friends, and I

like visiting him a lot. Spending time with you guys every other month had always been a blast. I didn't want to ruin this."

I felt shaky and struggled wrapping my brain around what Tabby was implying.

"So what you're saying is... W-what is it that you're saying?"

Tabby looked directly into my eyes, and I couldn't suppress the deep shiver rocking my body. He reached out a hand and brushed his fingers along my cheek. I swallowed nervously. God, he was so close. He ran his thumb along my jaw and across my lower lip as he cupped my face. The simple touch did strange and exciting things to my heart, and the unfamiliar sensation drove me a little wild.

"I like you Harlie. I've liked you so, so incredibly much for far too long. And you know what? I think I've had my fill of sleepless nights."

My mind was spinning from what he was saying and my heart thumping erratically from the way he was looking at me. Green eyes eating me up.

"Recently I realized something... The universe doesn't wait for me. There's so much to lose here. Just think if something would happen to one of us." His voice cracked a little, and I watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

"And... if I'm not going to take what I want then someone else might snatch it away before my eyes. Harlie, I can't stand the thought of not having you. Not anymore." He slid his hand toward my neck and rubbed affectionately.

"Okay," I whispered, unsure whether I was supposed to be saying anything in response to that, or if he wanted to continue talking. I tried to focus on anything but his lips, his tempting, reddish lips. Swallowing had become so difficult all of a sudden. I felt skittish and hot and dizzy. The adrenaline coursing through me made my head spin so hard I couldn't think.

Tabby chuckled nervously and tightened his fingers around the hair at the base of my neck, tugging. My shoulders slumped, feeling the tension leaving my body, and I relaxed a little when he pulled me closer and rested his forehead against mine. My eyes fluttered shut. Hmm. He smelled so nice, so sweet and woody like the warm summer air all around us, only so much more intense and intoxicating.

"Jeez, Harlie, you make me crazy as a bedbug."

Things were finally sinking in; I was starting to get what Tabby was saying, and I could hardly contain the laugh that was threatening to bubble up. Wow. My brain surely had short-circuited.

“Please tell me that I’m not getting it all wrong here, Harlie.” Tabby’s hands were now both holding on to my heated face, and I shivered. He was looking straight at me, his eyes going all dark and intense. My hands found his arms, and I clutched them, uncertain and a little anxious. Tabby continued, “I’d like to think I know that you like me, too. That I’m not alone in this. Please tell me I’m not.”

Unable to speak, to give voice to my thoughts, my millions of jumbled thoughts, I did the only thing I could do—I closed the small space between us with a kiss. My lips found his in the semidark by instinct, as if they knew exactly where they belonged. I melted fast when his tongue nudged mine, so hot and wet. A soft moan vibrated against my lips, and he kissed me a little deeper. Tabby’s gentle hands caressed my neck, his thumbs drawing circles behind my ears, soothing, arousing. When his lips captured my tongue, and he sucked it into his mouth, I gripped his arm a little tighter, my heart racing in my chest, beating like a snare drum.

The air between us grew hotter, and I could hear the start of the fireworks display in the distance, each cracking and popping growing a little closer. Slowly I detached myself from Tabby, careful not to get stuck somewhere, somehow and hurt either of us. With a gasp, I fell to the ground, intentionally of course, collapsing onto my back like a fair lady—throwing my hand over my eyes and all.

“Harlie? Are you all right?”

I cracked one eye open in time to see bright blue and purple stars exploding in the distant sky, the glowing lights framing Tabby magically. He was hovering above me, brows pinched together, concern written all over his pretty face. I had to bite my lower lip to keep myself from chuckling. Cuteness overload. Tabby must’ve noticed, because one side of his lips curved into a half smile. He looked even more dazzling with his flushed cheeks, ruffled hair, and the glowing colors against the dark night sky in the back.

“Do I have a swooning effect on you?” Tabby teased with a smirk.

“Nope. Not at all.” I snickered. “Must’ve been the fireworks.”

Tabby lifted one eyebrow, full on smiling now.

“I’m glad. Wouldn’t want this to become a habit. I’m absolutely awful with fainting and blood,” Tabby admitted.

“Ooooh, then you’d make a terrible nurse,” I mocked, stroking my hand up his chest and down his arm. God he felt good; so firm with just the right amount of muscles.

“Precisely why it would’ve been a poor choice of profession.”

I couldn’t stop smiling stupidly.

“What if, one day, you have to play a doctor and there’s loads of fake blood?”

“Then I’ll think of you and when you spilled tomato sauce all over yourself,” Tabby teased, snickering a little evilly. I punched him playfully in the arm, muttering a weak “*ass*” before giggling along.

Tabby lowered himself down and pressed a chaste kiss to my nose, his eyes finding mine. I smiled, hoping to convey what I couldn’t say. When he got it, understanding my “*Yes, please,*” he smiled too. Holding himself up on his left elbow, Tabby reached for my white beanie and pulled it off with a smirk, then his lips brushed mine and he kissed me again, long and oh so gently. When his fingers combed through my hair, I made a strange sound in the back of my throat that sounded a lot like a purr.

After the longest, sweetest kiss, Tabby dropped onto the blanket next to me and scooted closer and closer, until our shoulders and legs touched. I was struck with the romanticism of the moment as we were both looking up now, surrounded by the whizzing chirr of insects, taking in the beautiful bursts of color against the darkness of the early night sky, creating one majestic scene after the other.

Tabby reached for my hand and entwined our fingers, squeezing gently. A rush of heat surged through my body, and I thought I could hear my skin buzzing with all the excitement that seemed to be building deep within me. He brought my hand to his mouth and kissed my knuckles.

“I really, really like you, Kiddo.”

I could hear the pleased smirk in his voice, and I wanted to growl but let it slide. A moment later there was a bit of rustling and a wet smack against my cheek. Tabby’s lips. I couldn’t suppress the wide grin from spreading on my face if I wanted. Tabby kissed me. More than once. I couldn’t believe it!

“Thanks, Harlie.”

“What for?”

“For giving me a chance.”

“Am I?” I turned to look at him, making a serious face. “What gave you that impression?”

“I sure hoped you would,” Tabby said with a sigh, a wide-eyed look on his face. “Considering you let me kiss you and all.”

“Hmm,” I hummed. “Maybe I could be persuaded into the idea.”

“You’re a sneaky one, Harlie Kingston.” Tabby leaned in and kissed my forehead. “I’m up for the challenge. I’ll give it my best shot in wooing you.”

“Hmm,” I hummed again. “Maybe I’ll just go for it. Live a little and all, you know? Besides, you’ve already got me pretty wooed, Mr. Hotshot.” Damn, I should stop talking now. His kiss must’ve turned my brain into a bucket full of goo. I couldn’t think.

Tabby snickered. “Are you sure?” I nodded, staring at him dreamily. Tabby grinned and poked my cheek with his finger. “No changing your mind now, Kiddo.”

“Yeah, yeah. All right,” I chuckled and poked him back. “Blame the fireworks for my temporary insanity.”

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

Tabby looked at me then, stared directly into my eyes, and I knew, without a shadow of a doubt that he meant it. Meant every word he said, not just today but always. He was just that kinda guy.

“You’re pretty confident aren’t you?” I asked, still somewhat amused.

“Me? No, not at all. I’m scared shitless, can’t you tell?”

Tabby sounded serious, and the tight set of his jaw told me he was telling the truth. The knowledge that he was afraid I might reject him filled me with an unexpected warmth, and my skin tingled as if a thousand bees were living underneath.

“But you’re *always* confident,” I told him, because that was my image of him: strong, graceful and confident, beautiful, inside and out, and the most generous person I ever met.



“Maybe often, yeah,” Tabby whispered, his eyes seeking out mine in the darkness. “But not when there’s so much to lose. Honestly, I’m still worried I’m too late, that I wasted all this time and you’re not really into the idea of giving me a chance after all.”

“Oh, I *am* into the idea. A hundred percent, trust me,” I assured him. Taking his hand back into mine, I tugged him closer. “I really, really like you too, Tab,” I said sincerely. “I’m excited to explore this, *thing*, between us.”

“Me too.” Tabby smiled again, his bright green eyes sparkling. He brushed his fingers up my arm to my neck, where he stroked the smooth skin with his thumb. “I think it can be a truly good *thing*.”

Oh, yeah. I wanted to see what could be between us. I wanted it so badly. And despite the goose bumps and cold sweat covering my arms and neck, I hadn’t been that excited in all my life. It was terrifying to think that we’d just flipped a switch and suddenly our distant friendship turned into something more, something different. Something exhilarating and brand-new.

I wondered if someone had poured crazy voodoo-juice in our Mountain Dew or something.

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## Chapter Thirteen

Back at the motel, Tabby took the first turn in the shower as seemed to have become our unspoken ritual. Nervously walking up and down the small room, I briefly noted there was a fresh and inviting scent of apples with a hint of vanilla in the air. Damn, my heart was all jittery, and I wasn't able to focus on anything but replaying what happened down by the lake where Tabby kissed me. He likes me. He wants to kiss me again. Probably. Maybe. Hopefully. How was that possible?

When Tabby came out, a dark blue towel wrapped around his waist, I slipped by without daring to look at him. Oh God, I'm being *absolutely* ridiculous. The bathroom was steamy and rather narrow, but the shower was neat, all shiny silver and light blue tiles. Stepping into the wet shower, I got a good whiff of Tabby's spicy shower gel and my knees nearly gave out. Damn, I was so, so weak for that scent.

The hot water felt wonderful, and I lingered, soaping and rinsing leisurely, because I was hella nervous about going back into our bedroom and facing Tabby. It was absurd, of course, but I couldn't help it. Something had changed between us, and suddenly all my worries and fears seemed amplified by a million. I couldn't stand the thought of embarrassing myself in front of Tabby tonight. That was not the only thing weighing heavily on my mind, so were my feelings toward him—they seemed so much stronger, as was the longing to be in his arms and at the receiving end of all his kisses and affections.

I quickly dried my hair with one of those soft towels and brushed my teeth with the cinnamon paste we picked up at a store the other day. With shaky hands, I slipped into a pair of black track pants and the same *Batman* shirt I slept in the night before, then let my legs lead the way back into our room.

Wow. Tabby stood in front of me wearing a classic black tee and insanely trendy gray sweatpants I had never seen before in my life. They should be illegal, but I was glad they weren't. The way they hugged his slender waist and muscular thighs perfectly made my head spin. The heat around my neck grew as I tried not to stare, but my eyes weren't very cooperative.

"Sit with me, Harlie?" Tabby asked with a sweet smile and reached for my hand.

I swallowed nervously as I was being led toward the neatly made bed, covered in a fluffy down comforter with an elegant Bordeaux bed runner that

swept across the bottom of the king, and a huge pile of inviting snow white pillows resting against the wooden headboard. A soft ballad filled the small room, coming from his phone, which was plugged into a portable speaker on the bedside table. The moment my butt collided with the mattress, Tabby was right by my side and scooted closer until our legs and shoulders touched. I was feeling so damn nervous, and the butterflies in my stomach weren't helping at all.

Tabby smiled sweetly and twisted around, tugging me closer, his nose touching my neck. I shivered when his fingers brushed my jaw before they came to rest on the other side, his palm cupping my cheek. The skin of his hand was warm against mine and a little damp. Tabby pressed a lingering kiss to my throat, his nose nudging my jaw.

"Is this okay?" he whispered, and his warm breath tickled the skin on my neck.

"Yeah," I breathed, and he kissed me again, softly, carefully. "Good. Feels good."

I hated myself for being so awkward, frozen to the spot, and like I'd never done this before. But truth was, I'd never done anything with anyone that mattered and not in a bed. I was a bit freaked out about the significance of being with Tabby and the fact that he might want more from me tonight than I knew how to give.

"How's that?" Tabby kissed my cheek, my ear, then lower and back up, his tongue tickling the inside of it then. "Still good?" he asked with a playfulness I'd like to see more of. But more than anything, I wanted another taste of his lips.

"Very good." I nodded and my hand found the back of his neck, tugging at his hair tentatively. My fingers brushed the thin silver chain, and I played with it while running my hand up into his thick hair and back downward. Goose bumps erupted all over my back and arms when he suckled on a spot below my jaw. I had to taste him. "Kiss me, Tab."

Tabby pulled away, and I opened my eyes. When had I closed them? He smiled wickedly and his eyes fluttered shut as he brushed his lips across mine in a feathery light touch. I poked out my tongue and wet both our lips. Tabby growled a little but didn't deepen the kiss. It was maddening.

"Tab," I murmured impatiently, shivering when his fingers danced down my arms. "Kiss me like you mean it."

Tabby chuckled and claimed my lips in a demanding kiss. Oh yeah, that was hot. Lips sliding and nipping. I could feel his need and hunger as much as his affection and passion. My skin was buzzing with anticipation, and excitement thrummed through my veins leaving me dizzy. I clutched his arms and shivered. His mouth was so velvety and wet, tasting minty with a hint of lemon.

I loved how his mouth owned mine, all fierce and bursting with desire, and the way our lips danced together was intoxicating, the touch of his tongue leaving me breathless. When his hand slipped down my thighs and squeezed, I let out a breathless giggle, my heart stuttering. Oh wow, this is really happening. Tabby was touching me, kissing me. Wanting me.

“Tell me if you want me to stop,” he whispered close to my ear, his hot breath ghosting over my skin. I nodded, a slight whimper slipping from my lips. Yeah, absolutely no way.

“Don’t stop.” I didn’t think I would ever want him to stop.

Tabby wrapped his arms around me and tugged me to him, then further onto the mattress. My hand found his neck and I held on, my stomach dropping when he lowered me down and sucked on my bottom lip, like bruising my mouth was the best thing in the world. Like I was exactly what he wanted in his bed right then. I moaned and wriggled, craving more. More lips and kisses, more touch and skin, just more. And he gave me slightly more, but not enough.

“Tab,” I gasped and nudged my nose against his when we broke for air. My body started trembling, and Tabby tightened his arms around me. He pressed a wet kiss against my cheek before lifting his head to look at me.

“Okay?” Tabby whispered and began untangling himself from me. I could feel goose bumps on his skin where our arms touched. “We can slow down. Stop even if you want.”

“No, it just...” I reached for him and pulled his body flush against mine where it belonged. “It scares me how badly I want you to hold me and kiss me,” I whispered and brushed my lips over his cheek and then against his soft, swollen mouth. “Don’t stop kissing me, Tabby.”

Tabby took my face into his hands, and then there was no slowing down at all. He teased and nibbled and bit, sucking at my tongue and squeezing my waist with firm fingers. I felt his other hand running down the underside of my thigh, and it was as if I was falling into a bottomless hole, falling further and further away from reality. My vision was fuzzy, my heart thumping so hard it

scared me, and all I wanted was Tabby—he was all I could hear and taste and feel.

“Mmm... I’m so hot for you, Harlie,” Tabby confessed breathlessly, tiny puffs of air tickling my cheek. I felt a hand on my ass, squeezing my cheek in a wicked way that made my blood boil and had me bucking against Tabby’s groin, feeling that he was as hard as I was. Hot and hard and it felt oh so good.

Caressing his neck, I hummed against his soft, wet lips, hoping it would encourage him to do something about it. Tabby pushed his hardness against mine over and over, kissing his way up to my ear. “I love holding you in my arms.”

I hummed in agreement. I loved being held by him, too. At this point I couldn’t form any words for the life of me, and hoped like hell he didn’t mind. The constant rotating and the delicious friction encouraged my cock to throb and throb and chub out until it was becoming painful.

“Can I taste you?”

Tabby’s voice was deep and warm in my ear, and I nodded, giving him a choking, “Uh-huh.”

With a soft chuckle and a gentle smile, he began undressing me, taking his sweet time getting me out of my shirt and track pants. While I ran my hand under his shirt, tugging in a silent prayer to get him naked too, he showered me with heavenly kisses, so soft and delicate and minty. When we were both stripped of everything we had on, Tabby lowered me back down, his lips tenderly opening mine. Our tongues brushed and time stopped.

“You smell like the sweetest, rarest flower in the middle of the desert,” Tabby whispered and nosed his way downward, pressing little kisses on the inside of my throat and all over my chest. His wet lips fastened around my nipple and he suckled hard.

“Taste even better. Like nothing I ever sampled,” he whispered and flicked his tongue over the hardened nub. I gasped when his thumb teased the other one simultaneously.

The need to touch Tabby too, in whatever way possible, was so strong it made my chest constrict. I forced my eyes shut and reached for him, my hands finding his shoulder, and I held on, loving the softness and warmth of his skin against my fingertips. Knowing that it was Tabby I could touch so freely made my cock throb and leak and heaven help me, I wanted him to touch it so bad.

“Mmm... I love how you feel, Harlie.” Tabby’s hands were squeezing my thighs, his warm skin running up and down the underside of my leg.

I curled my fingers around the side of his neck and moaned when he dragged his teeth over my sensitive skin, nipping at my stomach. It made my body rock with tiny shivers, caused my eyes to flutter and accelerated my heartbeat like nothing else.

“Right here, in my arms. So good.”

Tabby hummed, kissed, and nipped at my hipbones, his fingers teasing my balls with featherlight touches. My hips bucked when Tabby wrapped one hand around my painfully hard erection, and a moan slipped from my lips when he gave it a playful tug, and then another before his hold tightened around me. I tangled my fingers in his damp hair and tugged when it felt like he was slipping away.

His breath was hot against my skin when he fluttered his tongue over my balls and down the strip of flesh between them and the place where nobody had touched me before. Ripples of pleasure flooded my body when Tabby poked his hot tongue against my hole, then pressed it flat against my heated skin. With every lick and flick of his tongue and slow, teasing tug on my cock, I was closer to losing my damned mind. Without warning he stopped, and I took a deep, desperately needed breath, hoping to regain a little control over myself.

My eyes fluttered and my heart beat erratically as I watched Tabby move between my spread legs, never taking his eyes off my heavy cock in his hand.

“Damn, Harlie. You’re so fucking beautiful.”

One lick of his wet, hot tongue at the tip of my leaking cock and my breathing faltered. My body quaked and shivered when he took me into his mouth and suckled, swirling his tongue around, up and down ever so teasingly. My hips bucked, I could hardly keep them still, and he went faster. I watched that gorgeous, hot mouth I’d secretly wanted for so long, taking me deeper, sucking harder. So hot. Even though my eyes began to water and flutter, I couldn’t look away.

“Holy fuck, don’t stop, don’t—God, you’re killing me.”

My whole being was centered on Tabby and the silky heat of his mouth, turning me into a moaning and gasping mess, shaking and trembling in his hold. My world was shattering in the best way possible, and I couldn’t remember ever feeling this amazing.

“Shit, shit, shit.” I gasped but couldn’t get enough air into my lungs. A hard tremble swept over me. My head was spinning, everything around me tilting upside down as if I were lost in the atmosphere. It was glorious, and I knew I was done. “Tab, I’m too close.”

But he didn’t stop, taking it as encouragement even. My toes curled, and I was shaking, the blood pulsing under my skin. A heartbeat later I let go completely, losing myself to the overtaking power of a mind-shattering orgasm.

Holy shitballs. Wow!

I hardly had time to catch my breath when Tabby was all up in my face, with trembling hands, fingers dancing, fluttering across my lips and heated cheeks then down the side of my throat, the sweetness of his touch coaxing a moan from me.

“Gimme your lips,” Tabby said, his voice breaking as he looked at me with lust-filled eyes and a dazed expression. Ready to reciprocate, I was a little stunned when his fingers stroked my jaw, then curled around the back of my neck, and he caught my mouth in a fierce, nearly desperate kiss.

I felt Tabby crawl half on top of me, his knee nudging my legs apart. His skin was so hot and good, pressed to my shivery body like he couldn’t get close enough. Feeling Tabby pleasuring himself while sharing his breath with mine, ragged and sultry, was probably the hottest, most electrifying thing in the entire world.

My hands gripped his neck and shoulder, wanting him closer still. A desperate desire to crawl right under his skin overcame me, and I longed for this night to last forever. Tabby hummed against my lips, and the slight chill that washed over my sweaty body raised goose bumps on my arms and legs. He pulled away and took a heavy breath, his chest pressed to mine, heaving hard. I could feel his heart beating a million miles a minute.

I ran my hand down his strong chest when he leaned back onto his heels, half sitting on my left leg. “So hot. So beautiful, Harlie,” he whispered, barely getting the words out.

Our eyes locked and my heart lodged in my throat. I watched his body move in amazement, so strong, yet graceful. A sheen of sweat glistened on his smooth chest, his nipples framed by dark beauty marks, with the silver chain around his neck adding a certain sexiness I couldn’t have dreamed up any better. The large intricately detailed feather pendant, hanging on a small hoop, barely covered an equally beautiful, smaller rose gold feather.

I wanted to tell him how beautiful he looked, so captivating, and how much the sight of him turned me on, but the words wouldn't come. I was too embarrassed to say things like that. I wished I wasn't.

Tabby braced himself on one arm, stroking himself fiercely until he came, painting my chest with streaks of white. Wow. My nose caught a few drops of his stickiness, and I shivered. Holy shit.

"Oh God, I'm sorry, Harlie," Tabby choked out. He was trembling and taking in shuddering breaths, slowly coming down from his high. "I should've asked... if that was okay."

"It was... hot," I said honestly, though a little embarrassed. My face felt like it was on fire, as did the rest of my body. Again, or still, I wasn't so sure. The sight of Tabby, all flushed and shivery with waves of passion crushing through him, made me so, so hot all over.

My throat was thick and tight, and I could hardly swallow, feeling a pang of disappointment that I didn't get to taste him properly too. With a sigh, Tabby leaned in and pressed a lingering kiss to my cheek, chuckling against my skin before pulling away reluctantly.

"I love how you always blush for me. It drives me a little mad."

I choked on a growl, and Tabby collapsed onto me, chuckling, tightening his arms around my shoulders and squeezing until I couldn't breathe. We were both laughing then, and he snuggled right against my side, naked and sticky and all, kissing my neck and shoulder.

"I don't wanna move," I whispered and felt Tabby nodding against my chest.

"We don't have to."

"We're sticky," I argued halfheartedly, wiggling closer and leaning in to where Tabby was stroking my hair.

"So?" Tabby yawned, and I smiled to myself. He was right. We were sticky, so what? We'd deal with the aftermath when one of us was willing to let go of the other.

We must've lain there like that for a long time, unmoving and probably catnapping, because I had the strangest thought I was back home and late for a class I hadn't taken in five years or so. I jerked fully awake, surprised to find Tabby lying on his side, one arm thrown over my chest and his deep-green eyes focused on me.



Tabby's lips lifted at the corners of his mouth, and his teeth flashed brightly white. A light flush dusted his high cheekbones, and it was difficult to look away, so I didn't. I felt a familiar warmth washing over me, waking a herd of butterflies in my belly.

"You got a look in your eyes." Tabby sounded dreamy, and I couldn't help but return his gentle smile.

"What look?"

"The one that always makes my heart stop." Tabby leaned in and kissed me soundly. "A look I can't get enough of. Please, don't ever stop looking at me like that."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and nodded weakly.

"I won't," I promised, because that would be impossible.

"I fear you might."

A flash of something dark clouded his bright eyes, and for a moment Tabby looked honestly scared, almost sad.

"No. I... I don't think I could stop looking at you like you light up my life if I wanted. Because you do, and nobody and nothing can take that away."

"Man, you're cheesy." Tabby snickered and caught my lips with his, making me breathless with a long and lusty kiss.

"I love cheesy, Harlie. I really do." He nipped at my nose and hummed, sounding overly pleased with himself. Then he smiled down at me, an enormous amount of affection in his eyes. "And cheesy suits you as much as blushing."

I growled a little at that, making Tabby chuckle. He bit my ear.

"Can we please stop talking about me?"

"For a moment, yes," Tabby whispered and pushed me deeper into the soft pillows, his silver chain dangling between us. I could feel his hardness nudging mine, the sensation of his hot flesh flush against me sending an exciting chill down my neck.

Tabby leaned in, pressing his nose into mine, his warm breath caressing my lips. When he began rotating his hips, slow and teasing, the small feather pendant brushed my chest with every move. Damn. He was so warm, his hard body so exciting, and then there was his scent—sweet and yet somewhat minty.

I was already light-headed again and wanted more. Always more. Holding on to his arms, I traced his bottom lip with my tongue, impatient to taste him again. A soft gasp escaped me when he kissed me, all passionate and consuming.

Tabby nudged my legs apart, and I raised them and tightened both around his hips, bringing us closer together. I returned his nipping on lips and lost myself in sucking on his tongue until Tabby moaned and writhed and rubbed up against me with a growing urgency that mirrored my own.

“You’re gonna be the death of me, Harlie,” Tabby breathed against my cheek.

He lifted his head to look at me, stilling his movements for a moment, breathing in deeply. I drank in the sight of him like I was dying of thirst. Flushed cheeks and damp, tousled hair looked amazing on him. With a shaky finger, I rubbed the bone under Tabby’s eye, brushed those long, black lashes, and when his eyes fluttered and his breath hitched, my already rigid cock went even harder.

“Then let’s die together,” I whispered and sought his lips with mine, hungry for another taste.

My hands trailed down his arms and followed a slick path toward his waist. Boldly I placed my palms flat on his ass and dug my fingers into the softest, fleshiest part of his body. Tabby gasped when I squeezed, pulling and nipping at my bottom lip. I quickly fell into a nice, slow rhythm of squeezing and thrusting my growing hardness against his. And I loved how the feather pendant tickled my skin whenever Tabby pressed me deeper into the mattress. I kissed him hard and long, with a strong yearning I felt deep in my bones.

Then Tabby reached between us and wrapped his fingers around my throbbing cock, a powerful rush of sensations startling me. I shivered at the contact and let out a growly moan when he tightened his grip and moved in time with our thrusts. The sensation was maddening, and I loved it. I knew right then, I’d be living for the incredible feeling of our cocks slipping and sliding, rubbing against each other with a slickness and heat that was spine-tingling and absolutely electrifying.

“Want to do this all night,” Tabby hummed and held me closer.

“Me too. Feels so good.” Staying like this all night? How I wanted that.

I felt Tabby shiver and tremble in my arms and gasp against my lips when he tumbled over the edge. Wetness covered my belly, and my heart raced faster.

*Wow. Tabby just came all over me.*

His breath tickled my burning cheek, and his hand tightened around me as I thrust against him. I gulped for air and struggled to get closer, though I knew it was impossible. My spine tingled, and all air left my lungs as I let go and rode out the flood of sensations.

Holy shit. How could this be so mind-blowingly good?

Ever so slowly, I opened my eyes to a vision I hoped to see a lot in the future. Tabby smiled at me with his deep-green eyes eating me up, looking at me with a certain hunger that mirrored my own. The sight was breathtaking. Paralyzing. I gripped his strong shoulders and pulled him back against me, his lips crash-landing on mine.

I never wanted his kisses to end.

“Let’s get cleaned up,” I suggested when Tabby untangled himself from me, but honestly I felt barely alive, definitely not strong enough to do more than roll over and go to sleep. I hoped Tabby had more energy left, and thankfully he did.

“Don’t move, princess,” he teased, pinching my nipple. Then he disappeared and I probably passed out for a second or two. The next time I opened my eyes, I still felt floaty and blissed out and couldn’t hold back the smile when I found Tabby hovering above me with a dopey grin on his lips, rubbing a warm damp towel across my hips, stomach and chest. When he saw I was awake, sort of at least, he nuzzled my neck and inhaled deeply, as if I smelled like his favorite dessert, which by the way I knew was lemon pie.

“Do you think I’m crazy when I tell you that I always feel like there’s some major cosmic shit happening when I’m close to you? Sometimes I can’t think straight, like I got smacked on the head, only that my head doesn’t hurt, but my heart.”

Tabby smiled fondly at me, all rumped and sleepy and gorgeous as hell.

“And when you look at me with your full lips all curvy and your cheeks so red your blush is covering all your freckles—God, most of the time I can’t breathe.”

Soft kisses taunted my nose, and I snuggled against Tabby’s side, sighing as he wrapped an arm around my waist, squeezing gently. I could hardly process what he’d been saying, much less make sense of what I was feeling. What had I

done to deserve this man's affections? By kissing his throat and holding him close, I hoped he would know that I felt equally enchanted by him.

I fell asleep with a little prayer on my lips: *Please grant me the power to make myself ready for love. Let my name be written across his heart, because his is already deeply engraved into mine.*

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## Chapter Fourteen

As we headed south on the I-95 toward South Carolina, the early morning sun streaming from behind us onto the cool asphalt ahead, my mind continued to fill with all sorts of questions.

Cheap Trick's "I Want You To Want Me" filled the small car while I was pondering Tabby's intentions, and whether I was ready for a relationship, if that was what he wanted. I was only twenty-one, at least for another four weeks or so, and at this point in my life I'd never wanted to be in one.

The thought of committing to someone, while still figuring out what I wanted from life in general, made my skin crawl unpleasantly. The only thing I was certain about was that I didn't want this, us, to be something casual, something Tabby would forget about once fall came. For me it was a dream come true as it was, and a greedy part of me wanted to hang on to him and those feelings forever.

Watching the seemingly endless green land scroll past my open window, I replayed everything that happened these last few days, from the moment I found Tabby on the doorstep of our apartment to last night. The fast development was insane. Or perhaps it only felt like it came out of nowhere, because I'd been too blind to see what was right in front of me all this time. If I hadn't been so caught up in my daydreams and worries, I might've realized sooner that it hadn't all been in my head.

Tabby nudging my leg startled me.

"Hey dreamer," he said, voice filled with affection. "Where do you want to stop for lunch?"

"How about somewhere in Savannah?" I suggested and scrolled down the colorful map on my phone. The sun reflected on the small display, but I could make out the possible route and stops I marked just fine. Tabby kept on insisting I choose where we should go, and I took my job of picking out places for our breaks very seriously. It was also a lot of fun. "We should get there soon, if you don't get us lost," I teased.

Tabby flashed me a grin from across his seat. "Are you questioning my awesome driving skills?"

"Just saying it's a possibility." I shrugged, biting my lip.

“Hey, I missed one exit. Just once in three days or so,” Tabby moaned. “And it didn’t get us lost exactly. We’re back on track!”

“Yeah, thanks to the GPS,” I laughed. “But back to our next destination, Savannah has an intriguing historic district and parks. Maybe we could even spend the day there, what do you say? Continue on tomorrow?”

“All right. Yeah, I can’t see why not!” Tabby gave my leg a squeeze and a pat. “Savannah, here we come!”

Ever since last night, I could hardly think about anything besides getting Tabby naked and into bed with me. It was ridiculous how badly I wanted him, and comforting to know I wasn’t the only one struggling with my, uh, urges. It was flattering to know my desire wasn’t one-sided, not at all.

Basically whenever he could chance a look away from the road, Tabby would give me those heated looks, with eyes full of longing and want. I recognized it because that’s how he’d looked at me when he had me pressed into the mattress with my legs securely wrapped around his waist. That teensy bit of memory alone brought unimaginable heat to my groin and had me squirming in my seat.

We’d also been sneaking a lot of chaste kisses at red lights in the city, and we rested our hands on each other’s thighs during most of our drive along country roads and through small towns and forests.

Soon we found the steak house I’d picked out for our lunch break, and then we made our way into the heart of the city where we toured the historic district and its neighborhoods, parks and cemeteries. We spent the night in yet another small motel room and continued on toward Orlando the following morning.

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“We’re here!” Tabby announced, stifling a yawn. “Last stop for today.”

I stirred and stretched in my seat after having fallen asleep for what I guessed had probably only been an hour or so, and I could hardly keep my eyes open. We left Savannah quite late this morning and stopped in Daytona Beach for a fun- and sun-filled day of lazing around, wining and dining. They had the best seafood I ever tasted!

“Orlando?” I asked and rubbed my eyes, a small yawn escaping me. I noted we weren’t moving, and without the music playing in the background, the car was eerily quiet.

“Nope, it’s still me.” Tabby shoved me playfully, and I grumbled in response. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Kiddo.”

“Then let me go back to sleep. The dream version of you was being much nicer to me,” I teased.

“Ohhh, I bet he was.” Tabby grinned at me, poking my sides. “Was he doing naughty things to you? Did he bite and lick you all over? Huh?”

“Sorry. I don’t kiss and tell.”

Tabby snickered and snapped my seat belt.

“All right, let’s get out of the car or I’ll leave you out here all night,” he teased.

Since we were in a big city, he insisted we get a nice hotel, one with room service for a change, promising me it wasn’t going to be a problem, money wise. I tried to argue the matter and said we could easily just sleep on a park bench, and I wouldn’t mind, but Tabby only laughed and checked us into a decent hotel, just outside the overly touristy places instead.

Once we dropped our bags, slipped out of shoes and jackets, brushed our teeth and were settled for the night, I walked toward Tabby, the carpet uncomfortably scratchy against my bare feet.

“Hey you,” he said with a lopsided grin and tugged me by the elastic of my boxer shorts until our bodies pressed together. “How are you feeling?”

“Hey,” I whispered, wicked anticipation rendering me absolutely speechless.

He could probably read the look in my eyes that said I was perfectly fine, because he smiled sweetly and brushed his thumb across my cheekbone. Tabby then drew me in for a sweet, lingering kiss, our lips brushing and pulling apart, then meeting again, the kiss deepening with every passing second.

At one point we fell backward, Tabby crushing me as we hit the soft, bouncy mattress. We chuckled and rolled around, lips finding lips, hands entwined. Pressing Tabby into a pile of pillows, I kissed him deeply, longingly. Passionately, we swept our tongues into one another’s mouths with growing, unsatisfied need.

I groaned when Tabby’s legs wrapped around my waist and he ground up against me, our hardening cocks brushing, the thin material of our underwear barely a barrier between our eager bodies, yet too much. Tabby gripped my

arms and sucked my bottom lip into his mouth, grinding against me creating sweet friction, showing me exactly what he wanted.

“Not enough,” I whispered and Tabby nodded. He reached for my T-shirt, his lip between his teeth and a look of concentration on his flushed face. I clutched his hands, and together we pulled the thin shirt over my head. Leaning back, I watched Tabby getting rid of his sleeveless lavender T-shirt and gray satin underwear, while I wriggled out of mine.

With strong hands and agile movements, Tabby flipped us around until he had me lying underneath him, securely between his open thighs, where I was starting to think he liked having me the most. He was so incredibly sexy like that, with his hair falling into his eyes, staring down at me with a look of utter delight and raw passion.

“Much better,” Tabby said and leaned in, nipping at my jaw before catching my lips in a tender kiss, the silver feather pendant around his neck brushing and tickling my chest with each and every movement. Our kiss quickly turned heated and shifted from hard and fast to soft and slow, then back to frenzied, time after time. Eventually Tabby nipped and kissed a scorching path down my throat and chest, detouring long enough to give each nipple a quick, rough suck and tweak before dipping farther down, kissing and licking around my navel and hipbones.

Happy to let Tabby have his wicked way with me, I submitted to his touches and kisses, rotating my hips and grinding against him with a growing urgency, showing him exactly what I, too, wanted.

At the tentative brush of lips against my cock head, I instinctively thrust upward. Tabby only gave it a cursory, teasing suck, releasing my cock with a snicker and drifted lower.

“Tease,” I grumbled.

My breath caught in the back of my throat when he drew one ball into his wet, hot mouth, and, I felt his fingers simultaneously massaging my flesh with featherlight touches. A wet, teasing tongue replaced his fingers, and I gave myself to the incredible feel of Tabby’s mouth on me.

“Me too,” I gasped. “Tab, let me... I want to taste you too.”

Tabby’s grunt of approval sent a million tiny shivers down my sweaty spine, and I rolled over and around until we were in the perfect position for both of us to enjoy each other.



I felt Tabby pulling me closer by my waist until his nose brushed the inside of my thigh. He nuzzled my hip and kissed a path down the ticklish patch of skin between my cock and thigh. I reached out, tentatively, and brought his groin closer to my face, wrapping shaky fingers around his rigid shaft. Tabby gasped when I tugged experimentally, his hot breath tickling my balls.

“Damn, your fingers are cold,” he whispered, then licked a slow path across my tingling balls and up the underside of my cock. “But don’t stop, Harlie. Don’t stop.”

He was heavy in my hand, and I loved the feeling of it, loved how hot and thick and veiny he was. Hells, I even *loved* how the dark, wiry hair tickled my skin where I touched him. My heart was suddenly racing, my chest constricting and the insides of my stomach tightening, twisting. I could smell the sharp tang of him, and I wanted to know what he felt like in my mouth, needed to know what he tasted like. It was all I could think of, all I wanted. I brought his cock to my lips and closed my mouth around his thick length.

*I must be dreaming.*

Tabby tugged at my hip, pulling me toward him and encouraging me to thrust into his mouth. At the same time, I moved up and down his shaft, applying the slightest amount of suction and twisting my fingers around the base as I sought the best angle to return the incredible pleasure he was giving me. I scrunched my eyes closed to hold back my imminent release as long as I could. My whole body was already tingling with pleasure, my balls twitching in the best way.

Heat and wetness surrounded my own cock, tugging and pulling, but I barely registered what Tabby was doing to me. It felt good, yes, so, so good, but Tabby—his hard and heavy cock in my mouth, his musky scent and heavenly salty flavor on my tongue was all I could focus on. His heat, scent, and spice filled all my senses and it was glorious.

When I felt his hands on my ass, squeezing, urging as I moved in and out of his hot mouth, I couldn’t stop myself and my thrusts went deeper and deeper, each movement causing another minor explosion behind my eyes. I tightened my fingers around his shaft and pumped faster, teasing his balls with my other hand, sucking eagerly.

He felt so good, so amazingly good wrapped around me, so hot and tight, and I loved that I could feel him throbbing, and so heavy, on my tongue at the same time. I shuddered at his groans vibrating around my cock. Releasing his

balls, I ran my tongue along the sensitive ridge at the back of the cockhead, feeling him twitch and leak salty precum against my tongue. God, I was rock hard and so desperate for release.

I whimpered when his fingers dug into my hip, and his cock thrust against the back of my throat. I swallowed against him, over and over, aware he would enjoy the tightness. So close, I was already so damn close. Then he tightened his lips around me, squeezing and sucking relentlessly, while I pumped his shaft in return and increased my own suction around him.

I felt him coating my tongue merely seconds before I couldn't hold back any longer myself and finally let go, spurting into the tight heat of Tabby's mouth, my entire body shaking violently as I rode out the mind-blowing waves of my orgasm.

"Oh good God," I moaned and gasped as I released him, struggling to take in enough air to fill my lungs. "Wow. Holy shit." I couldn't even begin to describe what I was feeling right then.

I thought I heard Tabby chuckle as he tugged at my waist with damp fingers, but I couldn't say for certain. My mind was still reeling and the blood throbbing in my ears had me all dizzy. My nose tickled, and my jaw hurt like a bitch. I was exhausted.

After a long, unmoving moment in silence, I twisted and turned, accidentally connecting my knee with Tabby's stomach while trying to reach a more comfortable sleeping position, which didn't include my ass in Tabby's face. I really, *really* wanted a kiss.

"Sorry," I mumbled sleepily and crawled up his sweaty body and smacked my lips loudly against his, whimpering when his hot tongue slipped into my mouth. With his hands cupping my heated face, he kissed me eagerly, full of passion and with the same urgency I felt deep in my gut and bones.

"Hey there," he said, laughing as he brushed my sticky hair away from my face. "All sorted now?"

Nodding I said, "We have to do that again. Soon preferably. Maybe all night even."

"I know. So good, huh?" Tabby asked with a chuckle, his eyes dark and filled with lust, leaving me breathless. I thought he must've been as insatiable as I was, because I wanted him again already, desired him with every fiber of my being, in whatever way possible.

Tabby squeezed my arm and pulled me closer yet.

“Uh-huh,” I replied dumbly, closing my eyes.

With a chuckle, Tabby cuddled me against his side, his lips gently brushing along my jaw and throat, stopping at my shoulder to kiss and lick at a spot close to where my shoulder met my neck. I squirmed in his arms, loving the feeling of his lips on me, especially when he lingered right there. He nipped and kissed my skin for long moments, followed by a hard sucking sensation.

“Hey, ouch that hurt, man,” I blurted at the nip of teeth, half shouting, half laughing. “Shit. What did you... No. You didn’t just leave a hickey there, did you?”

I twisted my head around to see, but my vision blurred at that angle, and I couldn’t focus on the spot that still tingled.

“Maybe.” Tabby grinned down at me, his bright eyes glistening. “Thought I’d give you something to remember me by.”

“I’ll always remember you, idiot,” I whispered and pulled him down so I could nuzzle my face against his throat. “A million and one hickeys or none at all.”

Tabby groaned, deep and growly, when I sucked at his pulse point, and the sound of it firing every nerve ending in my body, sending a glorious rush of blood all the way to my cock.

Tabby gave me a hickey. I loved that hickey—another first time for me—even if I couldn’t see it. The thought alone that he felt like putting his mark on me was a heady one.

My fingers found the silver chain around his neck and I tugged. “I like your necklace,” I whispered and snaked my hand underneath, running my palm across his throat. Up and down and back into his hair. “Why do you always hide it?”

Tabby moved so he could look down at me with flushed cheeks and dark, soulful eyes. “It’s rather silly,” he murmured and dipped his head, connecting his teeth with my neck, nipping gently.

“Now I really want to know.” I squeezed his bicep and chuckled when his tongue plunged into my ear. He seemed to love doing that, knowing already how easily it made me giggle and squirm.

After a moment Tabby pulled away, studying me. “I’ve been wearing it day and night for years; it’s as if it is part of me by now. I feel kinda exposed wearing it out of my clothes.”

“And you don’t mind me seeing it?” I reached for the silver and golden feathers, gently turning the cool metal around in my fingers. They really were beautiful.

“Of course not,” Tabby chuckled, his tongue darting out to lick his bottom lip. “You matter to me, Harlie. I want you to see every part of me, and that necklace isn’t even all that important. It’s simply a good luck charm and wearing it outside my clothes feels a lot like walking around shirtless, that’s all.” Tabby leaned forward to press a kiss to my nose. “I don’t mind being shirtless around you, if you haven’t noticed.”

Lucky me! I smiled foolishly.

“Why feathers?” I asked curiously. “Are you, like, a closeted bird fanatic or something? Don’t tell me you collect stuffed birds!”

“What? No,” Tabby laughed, his hair was tousled and cheeks still colored a light shade of red. “How do you come up with such things?”

“Hmm. I should get you a kitty charm to go with your name,” I suggested and the moment the words left my lips, Tabby pinched me. Hard.

“You’d like that, huh?” he snickered, tickling my side when I nodded eagerly.

“Uh-huh.” I grinned and squirmed in his embrace. “Would match your cute personality.”

With a shake of his head, Tabby pressed himself flush against me, nuzzling my neck with a muffled chuckle. I was still snickering when he kissed and nipped my shoulder, but the breath caught in my throat when Tabby cupped my balls, and I gasped when he squeezed and tugged. Cheater!

“I like feathers because of their symbolism,” he murmured against my skin. “Strength, wisdom and freedom among other things.” Tabby bit me at the junction of my neck and shoulder, not hard enough to really hurt, but God, hard enough to send an intense flood of longing racing through my body from head to toe.

I brushed the silver chain once more, from the back of his neck down to his chest, where the two feathers were resting between our bodies. With gentle

fingers I touched every inch of his body—those strong arms and his tender throat, his firm chest, small nipples and soft thighs—committing the sensation of his warm, smooth skin under my fingers to memory.

No matter what would happen in the future, whether we could stay together for a while longer or had to stop seeing each other at one point, I didn't want to forget how it felt to finally be his. Even if our time was limited, it was the best I'd ever felt and would probably ever feel. I was sure of it.

“We should get some sleep now, Kiddo,” Tabby whispered against my ear, and I felt him smile as he kissed my cheek.

“Yeah, sleep sounds good,” I mumbled and snuggled closer, snaking my hands around his strong chest and holding on. I fell asleep a little lightheaded and happier than I ever remembered being, with Tabby wrapped around me like a blanket, all warm and cuddly, his lips pressed against my neck.

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## Chapter Fifteen

We made good time on our final leg of the trip, arriving in Miami Beach before lunchtime, so we drove straight to the beach house Tabby's family owned, went shopping for groceries, and explored the heart of the city. I loved their house. It had two stories, a pool in the backyard, and a path toward a private beach. The interior was beautiful, artsy, lots of whites and cream-like colors, and absolutely cozy. But the best thing was, of course, all those hours we had to ourselves.

The wet brush of lips and flick of a tongue to the back of my neck woke me one morning, followed by a squeeze of my hips and another hot, lingering kiss to my shoulder blade. With a lazy smile, I rolled over, straight into Tabby's waiting arms, and nuzzled his neck. He shifted a little, holding me closer. My heart skipped a beat when I felt his hardness, his hot and amazing cock pressing against my lower stomach. Heat spread through me with lightning speed, setting my skin afire so fast it made me dizzy. Hmm. How I loved waking up next to Tabby.

My arms snaked around his waist, fingers fluttering across his warm skin. Tabby's lips found my neck, kissing and nipping, taunting me. With a hum in the back of my throat, I pressed my mouth to the smooth skin of his shoulder, returning the favor. Lifting one leg, I pinned him against me, rocking my hips in a slow, teasing motion.

Tabby ran his hand up and down my back, then deep into the mess that was my hair. "You like this?" he asked as he pulled away enough to look at me, locking his beautiful green eyes with mine.

I hummed and pulled him back against me, goose bumps exploding all over my skin when his nose nudged mine, his breath hot and puffy against my tingling lips. I wanted to kiss him so bad and never let go.

"Yeah, I do," I whispered, a little embarrassed, and squeezed his upper arm, loving the firmness of his bicep. How could he think I wouldn't like it?

Tabby's breath ghosted across my cheek and tickled my ear when he whispered, "No, I mean..." He slid his hand down my side and cupped one of my ass cheeks, pulling me flush against him. "This. Me. Us"—a shaky breath there, like he was afraid of hearing my answer—"Us like this."

Oh. That's what he was getting at. Still an equally stupid question.

“Yes, I do,” I said sincerely, lifting his head to have him looking at me. I was slightly confused, but he needed to know just how much I liked it. “I love this, Tab. *This*”—I emphasized—“is exactly how I want us to be.”

“Yeah?” Tabby smiled at me a little hesitantly, for a moment looking as vulnerable as that night in our apartment after he’d gotten that terrible call. I absolutely hated that look on him, and I needed it gone.

“Hells, yeah,” I whispered and nuzzled his neck. I wondered what had triggered this sudden uncertainty, and it felt like I had to reassure him somehow, because this—Tabby and me—was good and right and oh so wonderful.

“I think we are so very perfect like *this*.” I brought our hips close again and squeezed his firm thigh with my leg, the movement causing our cocks to brush. A sudden thrill rushed along my spine, and I hoped, wished and prayed, that he felt it too.

“Yeah, we are. I never doubted that.” Tabby caught my lips with his in a gentle kiss. “I think some weird dream messed with my head, and I worried because I feel like I steamrolled you with this trip and everything. I don’t want to mess it up, Harlie.”

“I’m happy you did, Tab. This trip has been amazing. Don’t worry about anything. We won’t let some stupid dream mess with us,” I promised and nudged my nose against his, feeling him smile against my lips as I kissed him slow and sweet. Hmm... I could kiss him until the end of time.

A gentle finger trailed down my spine, leaving a burning fire in its wake. I hummed with pleasure and brushed my insatiable mouth across his jaw, down his throat and farther, until I had my lips securely fastened around his nipple, sucking teasingly. Feeling his cock twitch and harden further against my belly as I teased and licked made me smile. I still couldn’t believe it; after all this time, Tabby was finally seeing me. Wanting me as much as I wanted him.

God, I couldn’t get enough of all that smooth skin, from his neck down to the soft hairs on his legs. The way his defined muscles twitched under my touch, pulling, shifting, was addicting. Tabby moaned when I ghosted my fingers back over his shoulders to his collarbone, up his neck to his jaw, cupping his face. I brought our lips together in a tender kiss that quickly turned passionate and more urgent.

Tabby brushed the back of my hand with soft fingertips before trailing them down my arm. Feeling surprisingly bold, I caught his wrist and brought his

fingers to my lips, kissed them and twirled my tongue around each digit, licking and sucking, hoping he would let me spoil him a little in return.

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“Breakfast is on the way,” Tabby announced and joined me on the large balcony later that morning, overlooking the ocean and their private beach, with miles and miles of golden sand glittering like gemstones in the sun, and the most beautiful palm trees I’d ever seen. I felt his chest pressing against my back and smiled when his hands came around my waist and squeezed me tightly. I loved when he did that.

“I called that coffee shop down the street, with the banana muffins that you like,” Tabby whispered then kissed my neck, his lips ghosting across my skin with featherlight touches. “They were happy to do another delivery for us.”

White birds crossed the sky in the distance and two large clouds framed the bright, yellow sun. The air smelled fresh and salty, and palm trees rustled in the soft breeze. The view was incredibly beautiful, but not as beautiful as what I saw when I turned in Tabby’s arms.

“Morning, dreamer,” he greeted me in that slow, soft voice that drove me a little wild.

“Morning,” I whispered, completely smitten, and pressed my lips to his, steadying myself by gripping on to his arms. I felt Tabby smile against my mouth before he kissed me longingly and with a passion that mirrored my own, the experience—like all of his damn kisses—headier than anything I’d ever known.

Tabby moaned when I slid my tongue past his lips, taunting me with pleasure. He tightened his hold on my hips, squishing me against the metal railing, and ravishing me like a starving animal. I cursed silently when the doorbell signaled the arrival of the coffee shop person. Tabby made a noise close to a growl, swatting my backside playfully before turning to get us our food.

“It must be awesome being you,” Tabby said with a wicked smirk as he placed two brown paper bags and a tray with steamy coffee on the round glass table.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” I asked, confused.

“You’ve got extra caramel and those nutty sprinkles on your latte. Like we ordered it the first day, remember? That fancy version they have on posters and stuff.”



I nodded and sat down across from Tabby, reaching for said beverage. He was right, the drink had more toppings than I'd put on a sundae.

"Why'd you get the special version? I told you last time it was a tad too much."

"I know," he chuckled and squeezed my leg. "I didn't order it. The girl working at the shop delivered it herself again, saying it was on the house. She also brought you an extra muffin."

Tabby sounded amused as he unpacked two plastic cups of yogurt with freshly cut fruits and two big banana muffins.

"Maybe that one's for you," I suggested. People usually couldn't withstand Tabby's charm and I wouldn't have been surprised if the barista had been flirting with him.

"Nope, she said, let me quote, 'I also added another banana muffin for your friend.'" Tabby snickered. "It was pretty obvious, by those orgasmic sounds you made, that you absolutely love those things the last time we were there. Oh, and she's hoping we'll stop by again soon."

Tabby winked and I nearly choked on a bite of said, overly delicious, muffin.

"Uh, I don't think we should," I said nervously, feeling how my cheeks were starting to heat again. I didn't remember any girl making goo-goo eyes at me or anything, but I didn't really want to go back now and find out who that kind person was Tabby was taking about.

"You're a real heartbreaker, Harlie. I think it's safe to say she really, *really* likes you." Tabby snickered and reached for my hand, tugging until the muffin I was holding touched his lips. He took a bite and hummed around a mouthful.

"Too bad I already have someone I really, *really* like."

"I agree. Lucky me," Tabby said dreamily and reached for my head, running his hands through my slightly damp hair. "Let's go for a swim and soak up the sun for a while."

"I'd love that," I agreed excitedly.

Tabby enjoyed dragging me down to the beach a lot, as did I. Swimming in the ocean was by far one of the most marvelous experiences! I loved it almost as much as simply being with him.

After breakfast we spent another fun-filled day by the beach and had lunch at some cool vegetarian place that was so good I wished we had one like that in our city. Thoughts of home made me a little depressed so I forced them away. I didn't want to acknowledge the fragility of the bubble I'd been living in for the past week.

A cab had dropped us off at the house where Tabby insisted on showering and changing before going out at night. He took his sweet time getting all styled up again, so I was already back outside sitting on a bench and entertaining myself with my own thoughts. I was good at that so I didn't mind the little *me-time*.

While waiting for Tabby to get back, I thought about all the things we'd seen and done so far. At some shop downtown Tabby bought me a T-shirt at one of the touristy shops that had the black print of a guy slipping on a banana. At the bottom it read, "*I do my own stunts*". I changed into it on the street and was wearing it all day because he looked so pleased at himself, and it really was a funny one.

Today had been filled with many fun conversations, a lot of laughter and only a few mishaps. I ran into a glass door at the candy store, spilled some of my yummy mocha Frappuccino at the Starbucks—luckily only on the table and not on myself or Tabby—and of course I tripped a few times over my own feet—without bumping into anything or anyone. Yay me!

I was watching the leaves quake and dance in the canopy of the trees above me when I heard footsteps drawing closer, and a smile tugged at my lips, guessing it was Tabby approaching.

"Ready for some pasta goodness?" Tabby asked, combing one hand through his hair, the smooth layers falling back into sexy disarray.

Reaching out a hand to me, he drew me in when I took it, and kissed me softly on the forehead.

"I am." *I'm ready for anything if it includes you.*

"Awesome," Tabby grinned and kissed me quick, full on the lips, then wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me along.

Shortly after, we arrived at a restaurant Tabby swore made the world's best pasta. I stood behind while Tabby made sure that they got our reservation right. I took a moment to admire his form while he talked to the hostess. Tabby was faster than I'd hoped and caught me red-handed. I flushed and the breath caught in the back of my throat as if I was seeing him for the first time.

Standing there in his skinny white jeans and navy white-striped tee, he looked gorgeous as all heavens and beyond. The silver chain around his neck reflected the sunlight coming in from the window by his left side. An elegant, thin grayish blazer-like jacket thrown over his shoulder and his brown-golden sunglasses clipped to the collar of his shirt, pulling it down a few inches. He looked like he walked straight out of some fashion magazine or escaped the runway in Paris. Countless bracelets adorned his slim wrists—some dark leather, others light blue-and-green with golden clasps or silver coins dangling from the leather.

With a grin, Tabby waved me over, and I carefully walked toward him, counting my steps and making sure I wasn't bumping into anyone, or anything. When our eyes met, he smiled so gently it made me feel all melty inside.

We followed a young, smiling waitress to our table. All around us twinkling lights illuminated the spacious terrace, transforming it into a unique and magical space. I admired the tiled two-colored diagonally striped floor, the dark wooden beams and lush vegetation from which hung glass jar lights and other lighting features. Inside were more twinkle-lit tables, oak timber flooring, elegant wallpaper in vibrant colors and patterns. A large, radiant oil painting of an ocean landscape caught my eye; the play of color was breathtaking. This sure was a fancy place, and for a moment I felt completely out of place. While it wasn't exactly Tabby's scene, he fit right in with his stylish clothes and stunning looks. Me? Not so much.

Once we were seated, another friendly young waiter brought us a basket of scrumptious breadsticks and took our drink order. I loved breadsticks. Reaching for the wooden basket, I picked up one and took a bite. Heavenly. It was rather soft, a little chewy and a cheesy flavor instantly exploded on my tongue.

"Red wine okay?" Tabby asked, and I looked up from the *Insalata* page. There it was again, that unfamiliar, funny look on his face. I nodded in agreement, feeling self-conscious when I realized he'd probably been observing me while I'd been munching away on my breadstick and going over the menu. I swallowed nervously. Man, it was going to be difficult getting used to being watched by Tabby.

Tabby went on, "Since he said it's a highly recommended one, I'm hoping it'll taste good with whatever we order to eat."

That sounded fine with me. I picked up another one of those delicious breadsticks and smiled. The dim candlelight made his eyes appear even greener, and I thought they twinkled a little stronger.

“Do you know what you want to eat?”

Tabby contemplated my question then said, “Think I’ll go with the lasagna. It’s probably pretty much my favorite.”

“Cool. I thought about getting the lasagna too,” I said, smiling.

With that out of the way, I thought it was about time to check with Tabby to see if he and I were on the same page, or if I could at least figure out wherever we were headed. The last few days had been amazing, almost like a miracle, and I was afraid that the reality of our lives would break whatever spell had been cast on us. I didn’t know if it was the best idea to talk about something so personal in a public place, but it was driving me nuts not knowing. I was scared it was all coming to an end already.

“Tab, there’s something I need to ask. What’s going to happen to us once we’re back? Can we... are we going to continue this? Whatever is happening between us, I mean.” I waved a breadstick back and forth in emphasis, realizing too late how weird that must look. I cringed inwardly and shoved my hand under the table, knocking over the pretty white flower with my action. Shit.

Quick as always, Tabby reached for the fallen vase, and with a red napkin, wiped at the little lake of flower water I’d created. I was so embarrassed I couldn’t move. Out of nowhere a waiter appeared and offered to get us a new table. Tabby refused politely, saying we were just fine, saving us from further embarrassment. But Tabby never gave me the evil look I would’ve earned from most people who’d hung out with me in the past. Tabby wasn’t like that, and it warmed my foolish heart, making me fall even harder every damned time.

“You were saying? Ah, right. You mean if I’d like to continue seeing you when our trip is over?” Tabby said sweetly, his green eyes locking with mine. “Of course I want that, Kiddo.”

Without thinking I kicked Tabby in the shin under the table. The bastard chuckled and sipped at his wine.

“You know what I mean, right? Going out as a couple and stuff.”

“I do.” Tabby hummed. “Especially the stuff part.”

I suppressed the urge to roll my eyes at him like some spoiled toddler.

“So you’re going to be okay, if this will make things weird with Lewis and your visits and all? How often can we even see each other?” That was the main cause of my heartache. He still lived in New York, and I had my apartment in Allentown. The distance sucked big time.

Tabby surprised me by taking my hand in his, squeezing, and then placing it close to him, my palm facing the table.

“Someone said, if it’s both terrifying and amazing then you should definitely pursue it. I’m sorry it took me so long to find the courage to do so. I should’ve tried harder before.”

He rubbed his thumb over my knuckles, and I shivered at his touch, loving the way the candle flicked across the soft contours of his face.

“We’ll make it work, you’ll see. You have to come to my first performance, and I’ll try to get away as much as possible. We don’t live that far from each other.”

He was right, we could make it work if we both wanted it, perhaps even if I wanted it bad enough for the both of us? Maybe it didn’t quite work that way.

“I don’t mind if Lewis knows, as long as you’re okay with it,” Tabby said, and the corners of his mouth turned into a sly smile. “And hey, I really like the idea of not sleeping on your sofa anymore.”

“Right,” I laughed. “You think just because you’re my boyfriend now, that will get you into my bed?”

Tabby cocked his head to the side and took my hand into his, squeezing. “Well, that’s what I was hoping for, Kiddo.”

I realized only then what I’d said. *I called him my boyfriend!* In the nearly two weeks we’d been together, we hadn’t exactly talked about what we were to each other, but since we’d kind of agreed that we were dating, I figured it was safe to say we we’re going to be boyfriends. Exclusive and all.

“I... uh, do you mind if I call you... um, my boyfriend? I didn’t think before speaking,” I sputtered, feeling the heat crawl up my neck and cheeks.

“Of course I don’t mind,” Tabby whispered and leaned in closer, squeezing my fingers all the while he held my eyes. “*I love hearing you say it.*” Tabby’s eyes glittered and he was looking at me like I was something precious, something worth keeping.

The waiter returned with our order right then, and I blushed even harder, praying that he hadn’t overheard too much. It was still a weird, new feeling, being openly affectionate or simply so obviously *gay* with someone else, for everyone to see.

Tabby and I spent the next hour or so talking a little about his latest auditions and what he hoped to be doing during the coming weeks, while

sipping on our wine, and eating one of the best lasagnas I'd ever tasted. I thought about asking the waiter if he'd be able to find out what spices the cook used, but knowing how dreadful my flirting skills were I didn't bother. It wouldn't work on the guy even if he was gay. It was probably some fancy family secret ingredient anyway.

After dinner we strolled down a narrow street, passing shops in the middle of closing down for the night while some clubs were opening their doors. The night was warm and the air smelled less like garbage and fried everything than back home in Pennsylvania.

Tabby was pointing out a building he found interesting when my phone started ringing obnoxiously loudly, echoing off the brick walls around us.

"Ugh. I'm sorry," I murmured and reached into my pocket, pulling out my phone. I tried to be quick and pressed the dismiss button as fast as I could, hoping Tabby wasn't peeking. "I thought I'd turned it off."

Tabby shoved me playfully until I looked at him. His eyes held mine, and I swallowed. Why was he giving me that intense glare?

"Why don't you ever take that call?" he asked curiously, and I prayed he'd drop the topic. I really didn't want to talk about it.

"It's not important," I said as firmly as I could manage. "I'd block the number, but that would be a bit too much I guess. I just hope they'll stop calling."

"It's your family isn't it? Your mom? Dad?"

"I don't want to talk about it, please. It's an annoying topic, total mood killer. You don't want to hear about it."

"Yes I do," Tabby insisted. "I know family business can suck, but I've told you a lot about mine, and you never want to talk about yours. I'd like to think you'd feel comfortable enough to share your story with me."

My breath hitched and my stomach flip-flopped when he drew me in close, pressing me right up against his side in the middle of the street. His thumb brushed the hair out of my eyes and rubbed along my cheek.

"Just know that I'll listen if you need me to, and I'll be happy to hear about whatever it is that is bothering you, okay?"

I nodded dumbly and squished my face into his neck, not caring who might see two men hugging cornily out in the open. I knew I was being ridiculous

about it, but I didn't like talking about stuff so close to me. My family, or rather what was left of it, was a bit sucky, and I was a little ashamed. I knew I was being sucky too, keeping things from Tabby.

"Okay, thanks. But there's no story," I mumbled against Tabby's shirt and hoped against all hope that he didn't want to know anyway and was just being nice and all.

"Everyone has a story," he insisted. Of course he did.

"Not me. No story there." I lifted my head and pleaded with my eyes. Tabby leaned in and kissed my nose, his lips leaving a tingly sensation on my skin that I felt all the way to my stomach.

"Yes, even you have one. I've come to know a few pages of it, perhaps even the beginning of a new chapter, but I'd love to read how it started and be there when it ends. Your story is still in the making, Sugar, and it's gonna be fabulous. If you really hate the foreword, that's okay, but know I'll still be dying to hear it and be supportive of its hero."

And suddenly I was choking on my heart, a tear threatening to fall, so I blinked rapidly and found Tabby's lips with mine in the dark. So much better than talking.

"Oh Harlie," Tabby whispered as he took my face into his gentle hands, making it impossible for me not to meet his gaze. The pleading look in his bright eyes was almost too much. "You're so great, don't you see? You're extraordinary. Never doubt that."

I could almost believe it, just then.

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## Chapter Sixteen

### *Tabby*

I didn't want to believe this trip was already coming to an end, but it was true. Two and a half weeks and now life was catching up faster than ever, but there were just so many things that needed to be taken care of back home in New York before next month. I'd gotten a call yesterday that I'd been accepted for the lead role in a play I'd been dying to be part of, and Harlie needed to prepare for whatever he'd choose to do come fall, or earlier. Hopefully he would stick to his plan of getting a degree in Early Childcare Education so he could work at a kindergarten. He talked about the kids all the time, and I was hoping to get a chance to see that side of him in the future. Maybe he would even consider moving to New York City after he got his degree. I was sure there'd be a lot of job offers for a determined, child-loving guy like him.

It was only after 8:00 P.M., and Harlie was napping while I was driving us out of Miami with a heavy heart, leaving the never-ending sunshine and a world behind I never dared to imagine. I've been places and done a lot of things in my twenty-five years, and I've met all kinds of people, losing many along the way, but nobody could compare to Harlie, and what I feel when I'm with him.

I've had boyfriends before and got my heart broken a time or two. Naturally I was still a little hesitant and worried and tried to be careful, but hot damn, he made it difficult to resist. He had that incredible pull on me, and the only thing I'd wanted to do from the moment we'd met was to give in and let go.

I was glad I finally got my shit together and acted on my constantly growing feelings for the guy who had my life turned upside down. With Harlie, I'd spent the past weeks in a constant state of bliss and delirium, with a light-headedness I'd never before experienced. Together we wasted countless hours exploring Miami as much as each other. I wished Harlie would always be close, that life could consist of sharing breakfast on the balcony, overlooking the vast ocean where we went swimming the night before, watching the sunset wrapped up in one another. And that every night could be falling asleep with my lips pressed against his, fluffy pillows surrounding us, and Harlie's arm wrapped around me tightly. Like he wanted to hold on forever as much as I wanted.

Traffic was slow going, and I decided to get off the highway and stop at the next opportunity, needing to stretch and take care of business. It was another



twenty, Fall Out Boy filled minutes before my bathroom break, and I actually had to hurry then. When I got back, Harlie was awake and lounging in his seat, staring at something in his lap.

“Thank you, Harlie,” I said when I joined him in the car.

“What for?” He looked up from his smart phone, a baffled look on his face, one hand stuck in a bag of cookies.

“For giving me a chance,” I said, holding back my grin.

“Are you still living under that delusion?” Harlie chuckled and threw a small chocolate chip cookie in his mouth, his deep brown eyes looking at me with a mix of amusement and strong affection—always with so much affection. I didn’t think I was worthy of his feelings, but I sure as hell wanted to be.

“Seems like you have that effect on me. I’m having a hard time distinguishing between what is real and what only seems to be real when I’m with you.”

“Me? You’re crazy, man. Haven’t I told you that often enough by now?”

“That’s what you do to me.” I reached out and took his wrist, turning it up, and tugged until my lips collided with his palm. I pressed a lingering kiss to his warm skin, then a slow path up the inside of his exposed arm.

I watched Harlie’s eyes flutter shut and felt him shivering. That, I had to admit, had an interesting and very arousing effect on me. Then our eyes met, my mouth pressed to his pressure point, and my heart momentarily stopped it’s beating, faltering completely. *I’m extremely infatuated with you, in case you couldn’t tell.*

“Hey, what are you munching over there?” Harlie suddenly asked, completely out of context, which was something he did a lot, and reached for the plastic bag of gummy animals we got at the last stop.

I snatched the pack out of his hand and stuffed one of the pink candy bunnies into my mouth, then curled my fingers around the back of his neck and pulled him in close, caressing his thigh through the tight beige cotton pants with my other hand. Harlie gasped sweetly when our lips collided, and I shared the sugary sweetness with him. I threaded my fingers through his hair, and he let out a soft moan. Wow, his kiss flew through me, reaching every nerve ending in my body, setting my skin on fire, and leaving me breathless when he untangled himself from me.

“Mmm... this stuff is crazy good!” Harlie said around another piece of pink candy he stole from the bag. In his loose tee, striped with shades of blue and pink and red, he looked cute enough to eat, even without the gummies, and I longed for another taste.

“I think I’m falling in love with you, Harlie Kingston,” I confessed, surprised at my boldness. I’d been feeling it for a long time but hadn’t been brave enough sharing it.

Seemed like I’d been worrying without reason, because instead of freaking out, his rosy lips stretched into a brilliant smile.

“It was the fireworks, wasn’t it?” Harlie’s features were soft and dreamy then. “They were magical, I tell you.”

“Fireworks?”

“At the lake?”

Ah. I hardly paid any attention to them, but the night had sure as hell been magical. The look Harlie gave me was challenging, and I wondered if I said the wrong thing and if I should have waited with my confession after all.

“You’re right, they *were* magical. That was the night when all my prayers had been heard and you finally fell in love with me, too. Wasn’t it?”

I tried making fun of it and got a surprising response I might’ve hoped for, but truthfully hadn’t expected at all.

“Nope.” He snickered a little evilly. Then smiled gently, his deep brown eyes beaming with affection. “That was the night when I realized the universe doesn’t wait for me either.”

Harlie reached for my hand and gave it a firm squeeze.

“I fell in love with you a little more every time you came visiting. I couldn’t believe it when you kissed me. It was impossible to imagine that you liked me *that* way. But when you opened your heart to me, I knew that some greater power out there had given me a chance at something I didn’t think I’d deserve, and I decided I wouldn’t let it pass.”

He spoke with an intensity that sent a chill down my spine, giving me that heartwarming smile again.

From the moment I walked into my brother’s new apartment and met Harlie, he’d stirred those feelings in me, so frightening and exhilarating.

Feelings I couldn't fight any longer. I was addicted to those big brown eyes, overflowing with fondness and wonder, like he couldn't quite believe I was real. And the way they held me captive, every damn time, was intoxicating. I couldn't get enough of it. Couldn't get enough of him.

Then I remembered the things he always said about himself, how frustrated he was about his little quirks. The thought of people giving him a hard time for being a bit clumsy made me furious.

"You know, Harlie. What you deserve is someone who treats you right, who dotes on you because you're worth that someone's affections. You deserve a guy who loves you to death and treasures every moment given with you, and... I'd really like to be that guy."

Harlie gasped softly, his eyes growing glassy, and looking gorgeous as sin. He never believed me when I commented on his good looks, and I hated it. Harlie was beautiful inside and out. I was going to make him see it one day as well.

"Only if I can be that guy for you too."

"Absolutely." I took hold of Harlie's hand and brought it to my lips, kissing the inside of his wrist. I loved how his eyes would always flutter when I did that, and the soft, warm skin felt so heavenly against my lips I never wanted to stop kissing him. "I'd been hoping you would want to."

Harlie opened his mouth to speak, but instead of words leaving his lips there was a high-pitched squeak, accompanied by his phone's ringing. I watched him reach for it and dismiss the call the same way he'd done a dozen times since this trip. I guessed I only witnessed half of the attempted calls, which made the frown I gave him all the more intense.

"It's my mom."

For a moment I sat there and stared. I hadn't expected him to give me an answer different from his usual "It's not important".

"Does she need anything? Help? Can we do something for her?"

Harlie shook his head and sighed.

"She wants me to come home for my birthday. She's been calling about it for two months or so. I don't know why she thinks I want to see her."

"When's your birthday?" I realized I still didn't know that little detail. I'd wondered before, but I never got it out of Lewis or him.

“Next Saturday,” Harlie said then covered his mouth in shock. “Oh fuck, don’t tell anyone. Please don’t tell Lewis.”

I chuckled, surprised he let it slip after all this time.

“Please, you have to promise not to tell anyone! Please, Tab.” Harlie was obviously desperate to have me swear not to tell a soul. I wasn’t so sure I wanted to agree to anything just yet. He couldn’t be serious, could he?

“Hmm. What’s in it for me?”

“Anything you want. I swear, anything. Just don’t tell Lewis or do something stupid like buy me a present.”

“Hmm,” I hummed, contemplating. “What about a sticky sweet present you can’t buy anywhere? With my signature on it.”

Harlie nodded, blushing deeply. “That might be doable.”

I laughed and pulled him in for a quick kiss. Jeez, he was adorable. And he was all mine now. How I *loved* thinking that was true. My sweet, sweet Harlie. I never wanted to let him go again.

“Now, can you tell me why we can’t tell Lewis and why you don’t want to go home? Or talk to your mom?”

“We don’t get along well anymore, as you probably guessed already.”

His shoulders slumped and a part of me wished I hadn’t asked. I didn’t want him to feel upset about telling me. I wanted him to feel like he could talk to me about anything in the world.

“My mom’s all right, she’s not cruel or anything, but stuff happened, and life started to suck. You know how it is.”

Reaching across the seat, I took Harlie’s hand and threaded our fingers together, squeezing in an attempt to comfort.

“My dad worked for a computer company, and they had him travel a lot. Apparently he was really good at his job and earned a lot of money. He set up a savings account for me without my mother’s knowledge, and when he passed away, I got all the money. I think that pissed her off a great deal.”

Wow.

“I’m so sorry about your dad, Harlie.” I squeezed his hand harder. “When did this happen?”

“It’s going to be two years in September. The money is what allowed me to move into the apartment. I couldn’t stand living at home any longer, not with my mom acting that way. And here I am, still wasting time figuring out what I want to do with the rest of my life.”

The kicked-puppy look he was giving me nearly broke my heart.

“I liked to think she was more upset about him not telling her about the account or something, but I can’t shake the feeling she just hates me for having it.”

“Why should she hate you? That doesn’t make sense, Harlie.”

“It wouldn’t be so bad if it was only the money she’s upset about, but I think she still blames me for his death. If it wasn’t for me he probably wouldn’t have been driving that day, picking me up from some stupid school trip. So, yeah I can see why she’d be upset with me. It still hurts.”

I nodded absentmindedly, trying to wrap my head around what he was saying. Harlie continued on, barely taking a breath in between words.

“But you know, after a long time I finally made my peace with it, that it wasn’t my fault, but I don’t think my mom ever will. The last time I saw her she was still giving me the cold shoulder, and those remarks that really cut deep. Like it was my fault the road was wet and slippery, like I called for a storm and took her husband away. Like I wanted my dad gone.”

“Oh, Sugar.” I brought his hand to my lips and kissed his knuckles.

“I know I should have tried harder to be there for her, but I just can’t stand the look on her face. And knowing she hates me a little? No matter how much time has passed, I just can’t.”

I nodded. “That must really hurt. Oh, Harlie, I wish you didn’t have to go through this.” I didn’t know what else to say, so I squeezed his hand again and kissed the inside of his wrist, hoping to find actual words of comfort. But what does one say to a story like this?

“And now she calls me nearly every second day to say I should come home, at least for my birthday. Apparently she’s super sorry now that she missed my twenty-first. But God, I don’t want to get my hopes up and believe everything could get back to how it was before.” Harlie looked right at me then, his eyes finding mine. He swallowed hard, and I could tell how much it weighed on him. “I’m afraid she hasn’t changed. That she’ll never change.”

We stayed quiet for long moments, looking at each other. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and hug him so tight he couldn't breathe.

"And anyway, I hate birthday parties. All this fake cheerfulness and presents nobody wants. I don't want stupid presents and people telling me how great it is I was born and shit. It's all complete crap."

"Wow, where is all this pent-up frustration and dislike toward birthdays coming from?" I shook my head in disbelief. Trying to lift the mood a tiny bit, I poked his arm. "Birthdays are cool, Harlie."

"I don't know." Harlie shrugged and looked out of the window, unseeing. "I just don't want to celebrate and definitely no surprise party or something."

He glared at me then, nostrils flaring and all, and I had to bite my lip to stop myself from chuckling.

"Okay, so you're a big boy, and you don't want to be spoiled with loads of ice-cream cake, games, and presents. And God forbid someone wishes you a happy birthday. Unforgivable. I get it."

"Do you really?" he challenged with a smirk. "Because if you tell Lewis, and there is a party or something, you're a dead man, Mr. Hotshot."

He was grinning now, and I felt my heart lift a little.

"Okay, okay." I held up my hands in surrender.

"Now that that's settled, should we get going? The sun is about to go down soon, so we better find somewhere to spend the night before returning to the boring life."

"You got it, dude," I agreed, shoved him playfully, and watched him roll his eyes before throwing a chocolate-chip cookie at me. I reached over and took the bag out of his lap and put it into mine, digging around for a handful of cookies to munch on. Chocolatey heavenliness. Hm-hm.

"You know Harlie, only recently I realized that sometimes you only get one chance, and I don't want to wait until the next life to get a shot at being with you." My hand came to rest on his knee, and I squeezed. "Maybe your mom realized that too. You might want to give her another chance some time, if you think she deserves it. I mean, she's your mom, right? Maybe it took her longer, but she might be coming around."

"Okay," Harlie agreed, looking calm again. His brown eyes even twinkled a little. "Yeah. Maybe you're right. I wasn't all that mature about it lately. It just hurts, you know?"

“I know, Sugar,” I said, lifting his hand to kiss the back of it, letting my lips linger. “We’ll figure it out. Together if you want.”

I caught Harlie’s eyes, and the wattage of his smile could have lit the entire state. I couldn’t help but grin back at him, literally from ear to ear. My heart did crazy somersaults, and I couldn’t have been happier. I had the most wonderful guy beside me, a brilliant job to return to and possibly an incredible future ahead of us. I liked the idea that we could be each other’s tower of strength.

“I like the sound of that.”

I liked the sound of it too, but first I had to talk to my brother and organize a surprise party.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Riina Y.T. currently resides in Germany. She spent countless exciting days in the UK and US and lost her heart in Tokyo.*

*She would be thrilled if one day her stories could brighten someone's day in the way those beautiful romances always lighten up her dull everyday life. Riina is looking forward to sharing many more stories with the world.*

*When she doesn't daydream about boys in love, and isn't glued to her Kindle, Riina loves to travel the world and explore the unknown.*

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