

When Life Leaves You High and Dry

by Zillah

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Chapter One

“Hey, *habibi*.”

Zain was smiling, but I frowned. “Why does your voice sound hoarse? Are you coming down with something?” It was only a few days into the school year. I didn’t want him falling behind right from the start.

“Nah,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s just from chow calls.” My confusion must have transmitted well over Skype, because after a second he explained, “That’s when plebes stand at a prearranged spot before meal formations and recite the menu, among other things. You have to do it with *motivation* and *enthusiasm* — which means very, very fast and very, very loud.”

I was even more baffled. “What’s the point of that?”

He shrugged. “Memory training and attention to detail. Also, in the morning, it’s a final wake-up call to the upperclass. They’re supposed to be up by then, but they mostly aren’t. Anyway, that combined with yelling ‘Go Navy, beat Army!’ anytime you turn a corner in Bancroft, and you get a cough known as the Plebe Hack pretty quickly. But no worries, I have throat-numbing spray.” He held up the bottle for me to see and grinned. “Turns out it’s good for more than blowjobs. Who knew?”

“ZAIN!”

He just started laughing, and I sighed.

“JJ, I apologize for my fiancé’s inappropriate behavior.”

Behind him, JJ looked over his shoulder from his own desk and said, “If you want to do that, it’s probably going to take a while.”

Narrowing my eyes, I asked, “Why? What has he been doing?”

Zain turned his computer away from JJ before he could answer. “Enough about me. How was your day?”

“You’re deflecting,” I said.

He snorted. “Hi, pot. I’m kettle. How was your day?”

I slouched down in my chair and glanced at the stack of papers I’d been collecting from all my classes, piled up on top of my bookcase. “Every class has been the same so far,” I said. “We read the syllabus and the professor tries to learn everyone’s names. It’s weird.”

“Sounds pretty normal to me,” he said, “but I wasn’t unschooled.”

“Yeah, I’m used to diving into the actual material you want to learn right away, not going over attendance policies and how your final grade is determined first,” I said. “And there’s a lot more deadlines to keep track of than I’ve ever had before.”

He nodded. “They probably have an academic services office where you can get techniques for time management, if you’re worried about it, babe.”

“I’m not worried,” I said, “I’m just still adjusting. Keegan and Quinn got through college fine.” Actually, they had both excelled. Quinn was salutatorian, and Keegan had zoomed through her bachelor’s degree and earned her PhD at a ridiculously young age. The smile Zain was giving me said he knew exactly what I was thinking. Quickly, I added, “Not that I’m comparing myself to them in terms of achievement. I’m saying we all had the same educational background before college, so there’s no reason I can’t do it too.”

“*Habibi*, I have no doubt that you can achieve anything *you want to*,” he said, and I didn’t miss the subtle stress on the last three words, or what it meant. “But you, Quinn, and Keegan are different people, with different personalities and learning styles. Plus, they didn’t have to deal with diabetes on top of everything else.”

“I know.”

“Speaking of which, how’d the big talk go with your roommates?” he asked.

I had been hoping he wouldn’t bring that up.

When I didn’t answer, he tilted his head a little to the right, and then looked at JJ behind him. “Hey, J, do you mind giving us a couple minutes?”

My stomach jerked sharply sideways and, even knowing he couldn’t spank me, my butt clenched.

He waited until JJ walked by and there was the sound of a door closing before he spoke again. “Seb, have you told them yet?”

“...I will.”

“Uh, yeah, you will today,” he said, with an amused look. “In fact... hang on a second.”

Apprehensively, I watched him doing something else on his laptop, typing and clicking on the trackpad a few times, and then my own computer dinged with an incoming email.

“That’s a sample letter to a college roommate. I saw it awhile back on the JDRF website,” he said. “I already modified it a little. Read it over and make any changes you want, and then email it to all of them and CC me.”

“What, *now*?” I asked.

“Yep.”

I wanted to argue that this was cutting into our already limited time, but that would’ve been another deflection, and it was no one’s fault but my own.

The letter started with the simple statement, *I am letting you and a few other people around me know that I have type one diabetes (juvenile diabetes)*. It went on to say that I didn’t want to be treated differently, which I liked, and then gave a basic explanation of what type one is, and how I manage it. I left all of that the same. When it got to the symptoms of a low and what they should do if I was unable to help myself, though, I balked.

“Zain, I’m not going to tell them that they should get me to eat something even if I resist. I’ve barely met these people!”

“It does also give them the option to call an RA or health services,” he pointed out. “But I would feel more comfortable if they at least know not to give you insulin for a low, and how to do the glucagon.”

“My RA knows that,” I said. My parents had told her while I was moving in.

“And if your RA isn’t available and paramedics take too long to get there?” he asked, much too seriously. Normally, he avoids giving me worst-case scenarios. I hated that he had to worry about me, and that I couldn’t be just a regular college student, not potentially dependant on my roommates for my survival. If telling them how to give the glucagon shot I had never needed would make it easier for Zain, then fine, I would do it, but I would still hate it.

I read over the rest of the letter without making any changes. It ended with, *I’m sure you have lots of questions, so let’s set a time to talk*. After the sign-off, there was a list of emergency contacts. Frowning, I asked, “Why are Mom and Dad the first people to call instead of you?”

“Because I can’t guarantee I’ll be easily reachable,” he said. “I’d rather they try your parents first.”

“You’re still the only number on my alert bracelet.”

“That’s fine, as long as you’re wearing it.”

I held up my wrist to show him the macrame hemp strap I had made to hold the metal plate. It had a red Star of Life facing outward, and *Insulin-Dependent Diabetes*, along with Zain's phone number, engraved on the side against my skin.

"Good. That list should be printed out and put somewhere like the refrigerator, too, okay?"

I nodded and opened a new email in another window. After copying the letter into it and adding the addresses, I took a deep breath and hit send. "There."

"Thank you," he said, with sincerity. He appreciates how difficult things like that are for me. "I have to go. My mandatory study period is starting, and JJ probably wants to be let back in. Text me if you need anything. Love you!"

"Je t'aime."

After he ended the call, I looked over to my closed bedroom door. At least two of my roommates were home, I knew, and I didn't want them to seek me out as soon as they were done reading that letter. There was another hour of daylight. I grabbed my bag and left.

On the sidewalk, I hesitated. Other than visiting the few buildings that made up the campus, I hadn't ventured out much. The only thing I knew about the neighborhood was that it was right on the borderline between the orderly, numbered grid and the chaos of the older, crooked streets. Getting lost would be very easy — and while that was sometimes appealing, at the moment, I wanted the familiar. That left Washington Square Park, where I had gone the first day. I glanced at the map on my phone to confirm I was facing in the right direction, and then started off.

It was just as congested as before, with people walking along the wide, flagstone avenues between the trees, or sitting on the benches lining them and surrounding the large fountain in front of the arch. A group of dancers were performing, but the biggest audience was on one of the paths radiating out from the fountain, by what looked like a monument to a bearded Italian man. They were laughing and applauding something I couldn't see. Curious, I moved closer until I could hear the performer.

"I'm just a walkin' my dog, singin' my song, strollin' aloooong."

When I found a clear spot in the crowd, I realized he was the same guitarist I'd seen before, except now he had a dog with him. It was a medium-sized terrier, with a curly, wheat-colored coat and a black collar, and it followed beside him without a leash, taking prancing steps in time with the music.

"It's just me and my dog, catchin' some sun, we can't go wroooong," the guitarist sang. He played three chords and took a small hop backward on each one, and the dog hopped along with him. I couldn't help smiling.

They must've practiced the routine a lot, because the dog seemed to know exactly what trick was coming up next without any signals. It was charming in a goofy way that Zain would've loved. At the end of the song, they both took a bow, to loud 'awwww's from the onlookers.

"Thank you," said the guitarist. "We're going to take a short break, and then I think we'll have time for one more. Remember, any donations in Jagger's dish go to the Angel on a Leash therapy dog program, which we are both very proud to be a part of."

I watched people drop money into the large dog dish and the guitar case he'd laid out on the flagstones, feeling guilty that I didn't have any cash with me. The guitarist poured water into a small bowl and stood talking to a few parents while the dog drank and the kids petted it.

Some of the crowd started to move away, while others were clearly waiting for the final act. I wanted to see it too, but it didn't seem right to stay without making a donation. I walked off to another area of the park and sketched squirrels and trees until dusk fell.

Chapter Two

My new routine started every morning at 0530. JJ and I had twenty minutes to shower, dress, square away our room, and read three news articles. That was followed by come-around, which meant reporting to an upperclassman for a grilling session on whatever professional knowledge we were supposed to be learning that week. Then came chow calls, morning formation, and breakfast.

We sat at squad tables in King Hall, the same as we had over the summer, but the squads were mixed between classes now. Mine included two firsties, three second-class, four youngsters, and two other plebes. Sadly, Platt wasn't one of them. Not that I didn't like Weir and Stevens, it just would've made keeping an eye on the kid a hell of a lot easier. None of our classes were scheduled together, either, so the only time I could guarantee seeing him was at company-wide events, like Saturday Morning Training, and he seemed to be keeping his distance then.

I figured I'd let him make the next move. He was still extremely spooked, and I didn't want to push him. The whole process reminded me of a feral cat I'd tamed when I was about twelve. It took months of building up trust before she would let me pet her. I have a scar on my right hand from the time when I was too impatient to read her body language.

The two hours after classes had finished for the day were devoted to PT. Twice a week, everyone except varsity athletes had drill and parades. The other three days, I ran with the marathon club. That elicited an eyeroll from Seb when I told him about it during one of our nightly video calls in the tiny window of "free time" between dinner and study period.

"This is your idea of fun, Z?" he asked. "Running for miles and miles?"

"I like it because it's the purest form of exercise. All you need is your body and some space. You don't even need shoes, really," I said. "Or clothes, for that matter."

He blinked at me a few times and then rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Zain, repeat after me: 'I am *not* allowed to go streaking.'"

I gave him a completely innocent look. "I would totally repeat that if I could, babe, but it might not be my choice. What if I lose a bet to an upperclassman and have to ride the statue of Bill the Goat in my birthday suit, hmm?"

"Does that... happen?" he asked, in a harrowed tone.

Grinning, I said, "At least once a semester, from what I'm told."

He sighed. "Okay, well can you promise me if you ever do climb naked onto the back of a statue that's been in contact with hundreds of other naked bodies, you will take a very long shower afterward?"

I put on my most solemn expression. "I promise."

The free period was also when extracurricular activities, called ECAs, met. I had signed up for a couple, including the gay-straight alliance, but I requested permission to shove off early from their first meeting of the semester so I could call Seb. As I left, I ran into Nakamura in the passageway.

"Oh, hey, Dad," he said. "Do you know where Spectrum is?"

I pointed behind me. "I just came from it. You're kinda late."

"I know. My squad leader decided to flame on me about my uniform, so I couldn't get away." He looked at the closed door of the meeting room and hesitated. "Should I go in, or wait for next time?"

"They seemed pretty chill. I think you'll be fine."

"Sweet. Thanks, Dad."

Before he could open the door, I said, "Nak? Sorry, I don't want to hold you up any more, but... how's Platt doing? I haven't had an opportunity to talk to him since we switched rooms."

He thought about it, then shrugged. "Okay, I guess. It can be hard to tell with Platt sometimes, you know?"

I snorted. "Yeah, I know. Is he getting involved with any ECAs?"

"He joined the judo club, and the Eagle Scouts association, I think. He doesn't talk to me much. Oh, except he did apologize for calling me a freak, and said he hoped we could put it behind us."

That was gratifying, and not as surprising as it would've been a few weeks ago. "Must've been difficult for him."

"Yeah, he actually blushed a little," Nakamura said. "I forgave him, 'cause I didn't see a reason to hold it over his head. Dude's been through enough recently, right?"

Beyond recently, too, I thought, but I wasn't going to share what I knew about Platt's home life, so I simply replied, "He has. You should get in there before the meeting ends. Thanks."

"Sure, Dad."

I was only a few steps down the passageway when he called after me. At this rate, I would be lucky to have five minutes with Seb. Still, I turned around and said, "Yeah?"

"I just thought of something. Diaz and I are both getting smoked by this calc assignment that's due tomorrow. You tested out of the first course, didn't you?"

Nodding, I said, "I can come around tonight and help you, if you want."

"That'd be awesome!" he said, with a sigh of relief.

I smiled. "No problem." In fact, it might give me an opportunity to talk to Platt. "I gotta go. Have fun."

Finally, he went into the meeting. I had to sprint back, which meant Seb started the call by demanding to know why I was out of breath. I told him about running into Nak and my plans, and he suggested bringing something to tempt Platt's sweet tooth. My boy is very smart.

When I showed up for the tutoring session, holding a tupperware container full of cookies from Maeve under my arm, Platt, not Nakamura, answered the door. He looked at me with nervousness hiding in his eyes, and said nothing. I gave him my friendliest smile. "Hey! Nak here? I'm supposed to be helping him with calc."

Slowly, he shook his head.

"Okay. Mind if I wait for him?" I asked. "He shouldn't be too long."

I thought for a second that he was going to shut the door in my face, but then he walked back to his desk, leaving it open.

"Thanks," I said as I put the doorstop in place. "So, how've you been?"

"Fine," he replied, barely audible, though I hadn't expected an answer at all.

Crossing to the window, I leaned against the radiator and took the lid off the tupperware before I held it out to him. "Want a cookie? They're not as healthy as the ones I had before, but they're even better tasting."

He stared at the container like it held the secrets to the universe, and when he spoke, his voice was just a breath. "Why?"

"Um... more butter, I think," I said, knowing that's not what he was asking, though I wasn't sure what his actual question was.

Seb probably would've rolled his eyes at me. A few weeks ago, Platt might've glared and stomped out. Now, he simply clarified, still quiet, and with an edge of pain in his tone. "No, why are you always so nice to me? Is it pity?"

That surprised me. "What? No! I don't pity you. I mean, I feel bad about what Belcher did to you, and that I didn't stop it sooner—"

"You didn't know," he interrupted, frowning. "I made sure of it."

"I should've paid more attention and gone to Cameron," I said, "so she could've questioned you about it."

Shaking his head, he said, "I would've lied. I didn't want anyone to know."

Yeah, I could understand why he'd be ashamed, baseless as the feeling was, but I still couldn't let go of my conviction that it was my duty to stop it before he'd gotten hurt, and I'd failed. "Then I should've caught him."

"You did," Platt said, looking down at his desk rather than at me. "He was careful. All the way until that last day, he made sure no one saw anything reportable. If you hadn't known I go to chapel on Sundays, and brought Cameron to the room, no one would've ever caught him. And instead of thanking you, I was horrible."

It took me a few seconds to digest his words. Did he really think I deserved thanks?

While I was absorbing that, he met my eyes, with great difficulty and a wary air, and repeated, "Why are you nice to me?"

I frowned. The answer seemed so obvious. "Because I'd like to be your friend, and that's what friends do."

To my sorrow, his expression shifted into pure bewilderment, as if he couldn't understand me wanting to befriend him. I was trying to think of a way to reassure him I meant it when Nakamura and Diaz came in from the passageway.

"Aw, man, cookies!" said Nakamura. "You're the best, Dad. Sorry we're late. This time it's Diaz's fault, though."

"You didn't tell me until three minutes ago that we were meeting up," Diaz objected. "How is that my fault?"

Nakamura couldn't answer, due to already having a mouthful of cookie. I offered them to Diaz, too, and after he'd taken a few, I casually put the container down on the edge of Platt's desk and left it there as we started going over their calc problems together.

An hour later, I'd cleared up a couple of misunderstandings and given them some tips on easier ways to do things, and was starting to think about my own pile of homework waiting in my backpack.

"Guys think you can handle it from here?" I asked.

"Yeah, this makes so much more sense now," Diaz said, and Nakamura nodded.

"Great. I'm gonna shove off, then."

"Oh, hey, before you go," said Nakamura, "my sponsor family has this huge barbeque in the park this Saturday. It's like a tradition they do for all the mids they sponsor, and they said I could invite people. You guys wanna come?"

"Sure," I said.

"I'm in," said Diaz.

Nakamura turned in his chair and asked, "Platt, you in?" and I could've kissed him.

Platt hadn't uttered a word since the other two mids entered, but he looked around at that. With only a second's hesitation, he nodded.

Grinning, I said, "Awesome. Meet up here when libs starts?"

After Diaz and Nakamura agreed, I collected the cookies from Platt's desk — there were now quite a bit fewer of them — and left.

Chapter Three

Living in a dorm, even though I had my own bedroom, was harder than I'd imagined. Five people made the tiny apartment feel crowded in a way my parents' house had never seemed with seven occupants. One of my roommates, a British architecture student, spent most of his time at his girlfriend's, but the others made up for that by inviting *more* people over. I wondered if the residential office had lost the form I'd filled out and mailed in over the summer, where I listed my roommate preferences as quiet and introverted, like me. Or perhaps they'd mixed me up with another student, somehow.

For all that, the diabetes talk went well, mostly. The British guy, Adam, said he had a cousin with Type 1 too, although he didn't know much about it. They asked the usual questions — did that mean I couldn't eat any sugar, or I ate too much sugar when I was a kid, things like that — which were ignorant and slightly annoying because I'd gotten them so many times in my life, but harmless. I did my best to answer them fully.

"See, I knew you could do it, babe," Zain said on our call the next night. "None of them freaked out, right?"

"No," I said. "They got really quiet when I explained the glucagon, and how to do it, though."

"That's good. Means they're taking it seriously."

"Yeah, I guess." I shifted back against my headboard and adjusted the angle of the laptop screen to see him better. "Except then, right after I was done, one of the engineering guys — Mark, I think? He asked me if you can get high off of insulin. *Drugged* high, not high blood sugar."

Zain raised an eyebrow. "Wow. That's a new one."

I nodded. It had taken me aback, even as the others laughed. "I told him no, but he could accidentally kill himself very easily, so hopefully he'll think twice, if he wasn't joking."

"Kids these days," Zain said, rolling his eyes, despite the fact that he was still an age most people would call a kid, too. "Any insulin goes missing, report it to your RA immediately, yeah?"

"I will."

"Other than that, how was your day?" he asked.

"Good," I said. "I went to the park again yesterday, and I saw this guy performing with a dog. He was singing and playing guitar while the dog did tricks. You would've liked it."

He grinned. "That sounds really cool. Draw me a picture, if you get a chance."

"I could just wait to see them again and take a photograph," I pointed out.

"Yeah, I'd rather have a drawing," he said. "Shows what you're thinking better than a photo."

I made a face at him. It was true, but I wasn't hiding anything at the moment.

Still, when I went to Washington Square again a few days later to escape my roommates' latest party and found the guitarist and his dog in the same spot, I sat down on a nearby bench and pulled out my sketchbook.

The dog performed only during some songs. For the others, he laid down on the plinth at the base of the monument and watched the man. I did sketches of them like that, too. Then I dropped money into the guitar case and the dog dish and walked back to campus, where I used the computer studio to scan the page in the sketchbook and email it to Zain.

Later that night, he sent back a thank-you, along with a recap of his conversation with Platt.

I don't think the kid's ever had any real friends, he wrote. I'm hoping this bbq will be a turning point.

So am I, I wrote back. I also hoped since Platt himself had told Zain he couldn't have stopped the hazing sooner, he might be willing to believe it now.

I wanted to press him on that issue over Skype, but I completely forgot, because five seconds into the next call, he tilted his head to one side and said, "Okay, what are you stressing about, babe?"

I stared at him, flabbergasted. "How did you—?"

"Well, I wasn't actually sure until you reacted that way," he said, with a grin. "Although those sketches did look a little heavy-handed. You're tense. What's up?"

Scowling, I confessed to my worries about the first quiz of the semester, which was bearing down on me in my art history class the next day. The only two tests I had ever taken in my life were the GED and the ACT, and I had prepared for both of those by taking practice versions over and over. That wasn't an option for this one. I had no idea what I was getting into.

Zain did what he does best: heard me out and then talked me through it. "Honestly, *habibi*, I know you've mostly done multiple-choice before, but I think a short-answer essay format works in your favor. It probably means the professor is looking for more than a regurgitation of facts, and you're an abstract thinker, so that's good. Do you feel like you understand the material?"

"Yeah," I said. "The class only covers modern to contemporary art movements, so I'm already familiar with a lot of it."

"There you go, then," he said. "Look at it like a conversation over dinner with your family, when your parents want to know what you're learning about. Only in writing, and without your brother and sisters adding their commentary to everything. Does that make it less scary?"

"A little." My parents never graded me on my conversation skills. Or anything else, for that matter.

"What time is it scheduled?"

"Three," I said, although I didn't know why he'd asked until I was sitting in the classroom, rubbing sweaty palms on my jeans as I waited for the professor to hand out the questions, and my phone buzzed in the one-two-one pattern that's reserved for texts from him.

I slid it out of my pocket and glanced down to find he'd sent me a doodle of a mint leaf with arms and a little smiley face, saying 'you can do it! you've got this!' The caption was *the encourage mint*.

Groaning under my breath, I texted back, *Awful*.

It took him only seconds to reply. *The pun or me?*

Both, I sent, and then had to put the phone away as the quiz started.

I used every second of the period allotted to answer the questions, squeezing in as much detail as I could think of and second-guessing myself several times. I was sure my professor was going to have trouble deciphering my cramped handwriting, filled with scribbled-out words and phrases. Would she take off points for that?

My blood glucose, which had already been running high from anxiety, skyrocketed. Midway through the lecture that followed the quiz, my brain was oatmeal: thick and wet and sticky. Focusing enough to take notes was impossible, and every part of my body felt sluggish and weighed-down. I should've gone somewhere private to test and give myself a shot, but leaving the class seemed somehow worse than sitting in the room and not absorbing anything.

The professor was asking about the Post-Impressionists. The part I grabbed onto, though, was, "We have fifteen minutes left for discussion."

Fifteen minutes. I could tough it out.

The second she dismissed us, I found the nearest bathroom and shut myself in the stall farthest from the door. My meter informed me I was now at 322 mg/dl. I shot the dose to counteract that into my abdomen and sat there battling against tears as I willed it to kick in. One minor quiz and I crumbled. Pathetic.

After I got myself under some semblance of control, I wanted nothing more than quiet and my bed for the rest of the day. My roommates had other ideas. Dubstep music was blasting from behind the closed apartment door. I didn't even bother to go in, simply turned around and took the elevator back downstairs, where I headed for Washington Square without conscious thought.

The guitarist wasn't there. I walked twice around the fountain and checked down all the paths to be sure, before I gave up and went to sit by the arch. I was debating whether or not to text Zain when he beat me to it.

How'd it go???

All the possible answers would either be outright lies, or reveal far too much. As I tried to pick one, the guitarist's dog, Jagger, came trotting up, sat down right in front of me, and looked at me with his tongue lolling out, as if he knew me. Like usual, he was without a leash. I didn't see his owner anywhere. Gingerly, I reached out a hand for him to sniff. "Hey, boy. What are you doing all alone?"

The phone buzzed again in my other palm. This time, it read, *You're killing me here.*

I sighed, typed, *It was fine*, and hit send.

The response was almost immediate. *Ha! Try again.*

I grimaced at it. He was such a pain. "Shouldn't you be running somewhere right now?" I grumbled, like he could hear me.

"Sorry? My dog isn't bothering you, is he? He kind of got away from me."

"What?" I looked up. The guitarist, with his case slung across his back, was standing next to Jagger. "Oh, no," I said quickly, blushing. "I meant my fiancé. He's being annoying, not your dog."

"Ah," he said. Then he frowned at me. "Hey, haven't I seen you here a few times? You go to NYU?"

"Um, no, I go there." I pointed in the general direction of my residence hall, and then remembered it was blocks away, and the entire square was basically surrounded with NYU buildings. "I mean, Cooper Union."

To my surprise, he sat down next to me. "You're an art student, right?" When I blinked at him, he smiled and added, "Not psychic, I swear. I just thought I saw you drawing me last time, and with Cooper Union, it's either art, architecture, or engineering, so."

I felt myself flush again. Some people can be weird about drawing them without permission. "Yeah, I am, and I was. I hope you don't mind."

"No, it's fine," he reassured me. "I was just wondering if I could see it. Uh, I'm Theo, by the way. Probably should've introduced myself first. Sorry."

"I'm Seb," I said.

"Great to meet you, Seb!" He grinned and held out his hand, and I was about to take it when my phone buzzed once more. We both glanced down reflexively.

Still waiting, brat.

Quickly, I hit the lock button to make the screen go dark, praying Theo hadn't had time to read it. My face was probably the color of a ripe tomato.

"S—sorry, I have to answer this," I said.

His expression was intrigued. To distract him, I broke one of my cardinal rules and actually handed my entire sketchbook over, opened to the page of him and Jagger. Then I turned away, so my body was blocking his view of the phone as I typed out my answer.

I think I did ok, but it hasn't been graded yet.

He replied, simply, *BG?*

Fudging the number, tempting as it was, could only lead to me sending him all my meter logs again. With no other choice, I bit the bullet and wrote back, *322 about 30 minutes ago. Bolused. Can't check now.*

Ok, he said. Test as soon as you can and let me know.

I will.

Behind me, Theo said, "These are really, really good."

I looked back, expecting him to be flipping through the whole book, but he was still on that one page. "They're just sketches," I said. "Not proper drawings."

"You captured Jagger's personality *exactly*, wow," he said. "If these are just sketches, I'd love to see a proper drawing." That seemed to give him an idea. He turned to me, suddenly eager. "Hey, could I commission one from you?"

I hesitated. I'd taken commissions in the past to make extra money, and although they weren't my favorite thing, I could do them. I was just worried about having the time for one.

"See, it's my husband's birthday coming up in about two weeks," Theo said, "and he's the kind of guy who's impossible to shop for because he already has everything he wants, you know? I need to give him something special, not, like, another sweater or book. A portrait of me and Jagger would be awesome!" His enthusiasm was hard to say no to, and then he topped it off with a puppy-dog face to rival Zain's best. "Please?"

"I can do an eight-by-ten in graphite for a hundred dollars," I said, half-hoping the price would scare him off.

He just stuck out his hand again. "Done!"

Chapter Four

I absolutely and completely hated every minute I couldn't see Seb, knowing how he must be feeling. Strict rules governed cell phone use for plebes, so I wasn't even allowed to call him during the day to hear his voice. Technically, I was breaking regulations just to text him, but if the Commandant himself had directly ordered me to stop, I might've refused.

JJ and I were supposed to go to the first meeting of Semper Fi Society together during free period. I'd forgotten about it until he found me in the passageway outside King Hall after dinner and asked, "You coming?"

"Oh," I said. "I can't. I have to call Seb. Tell me how it goes, okay?"

He frowned at me. "Everything alright?"

"Yeah, he's just having a bad day. He'll be fine."

"Okay. Tell him I said hello."

"Will do," I replied, and hurried back to our room.

As soon as Skype connected, I could tell my boy felt awful. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his lips were pressed together tightly. He'd texted me an hour ago to say his glucose was back below 300, on the way to normal, but a high like that isn't easy to recover from.

"Hi," he said.

"Hey, *habibi*," I replied, tender and soft. "Did you take something for the headache?"

In answer, he held up a bottle of Tylenol, and then set it back down on his desk, next to the laptop.

"Good. Why don't you lie on your bed?"

His eyebrows drew together, a line forming between them, as he pulled one leg up into his chair and hugged his knee to his chest. "Because I'll fall asleep, and I still have homework to do."

"It's Friday, babe," I pointed out. "You have the whole weekend to do homework, when you're feeling better."

The line on the bridge of his nose grew deeper. “Who says I’ll be feeling better tomorrow?” he demanded. “Or the next day? My life doesn’t stop for diabetes, Zain. I can’t just take a day off whenever I’m high or low. I’d fail all my classes!”

I took a deep breath and let it slowly out through my nose. He was already wound up, and I knew what I was about to say would distress him more.

“Not if you get accommodations.”

He stared at me for a moment, and then pushed himself out of his chair and walked away, so I couldn’t see him.

“*Habibi*, come back here. Please?” I asked.

After an endless few seconds of listening to his ragged breathing, he stepped into view. He didn’t sit, though, and the camera only showed me his torso, with his arms crossed over his chest. I wanted nothing more than the ability to reach through the screen and offer him some comfort. If I had been in the room with him, I would’ve yanked him close to me and held on for all I was worth.

“C’mon, let me see that gorgeous face of yours,” I coaxed, putting a smile in my voice. I heard him sigh, and then he sank down into the chair, brought both knees up in front of him, wrapped his arms around them, and looked at me with wet, green eyes. My heart wrenched.

I wished I’d pressed him on this issue back when he was filling out his admissions health forms and had deliberately flipped right over the voluntary self-identification for students with disabilities. At the time, I’d thought perhaps it would be easier for him once he’d faced the reality of college. Obviously, that wasn’t the case.

“Babe, it doesn’t mean you’re weak, or you’re not handling it,” I said, speaking clearly and calmly. “No one is going to think badly of you. In fact, I’m sure your professors would agree with me that it’s not fair to grade you on a test you took while it was physically impossible for you to be coherent.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” he said, shakily. “I told you, I did okay on the quiz. The high didn’t really hit until after. I don’t need accommodations, I just need to relax about taking tests.”

With a quirk of one eyebrow and the corner of my lips, I said, “Because that’s the only thing that could possibly throw your glucose out of whack?”

A tear escaped to roll down over the freckles on his cheek. “Please... please don’t make me, Z.”

He's always telling me I'm a horrible Top. I had never felt like one before.

"Okay, *habibi*, it's okay. We don't have to finish this right now. Do your Lantus injection, then go lie down on your bed, and bring the laptop with you. Don't worry about your homework tonight, alright? I'll talk to you until you fall asleep. Tomorrow is going to look better."

Sniffing, he obeyed me. Once he was settled under the covers, I rambled at him, focusing less on what I was saying and more on the lines of tension in his face. They didn't relax, even after he closed his eyes and his breathing deepened in slumber.

I kept Skype open all through study period as I did my work, in case he woke up. JJ saw it on my screen when he came back to the room, but didn't comment, and we both stayed as quiet as possible.

I had to leave my phone in my room during SMT. First, though, I sent Seb a 'good morning' text, surrounded by sun and heart emojis, to give him something to smile about when he woke up.

We ran the obstacle courses at the Navy Station — normally one of my favorite training exercises — for the entire morning. I focused on putting my all into it, to avoid hurting myself or slowing down my team. At the end, we returned to Bancroft sore, dirty, and eager for liberty to start.

"See you in a bit," I said to Nakamura as we parted ways. Platt had already disappeared.

I picked up my phone before even taking a shower, letting JJ go first. Seb had responded just after 0900 with *Back on target*.

Yay! I wrote back. *What're you doing now?*

Homework, so I can stop worrying about it.

Good idea. I'm heading to the BBQ, I replied. Though part of me wanted to cancel so I could devote my full attention to him, the bigger part knew he'd flip and insist that I not let him 'get in the way' of my plans. And I did want to check on Platt, too. As a compromise and a reminder, I added, *I'll have my phone with me.*

I know. Have fun!

*

It turned out Nakamura invited our entire squad from Plebe Summer. Half of us rode in the giant van his sponsor parents, a retired couple in their late sixties, had brought, while the rest carpooled with upperclass midshipmen. Most of them had been invited by the couple's other sponsor mids, Mr. Steinkeller told us.

"Not to worry," he added, "we have a strict no-rating rule. For today, you're not plebes. Just for today, though, so it's prudent to watch your manners still."

I wound up in the van, along with Nakamura, Stevens, Sullivan, Rawlins, and Platt. He was quiet as the others chattered during the short drive to the same park where Seb and I had picnicked. I thought I saw Klatsky, the buddy from my deployment that we'd run into that day, jogging in the distance when we arrived.

We got there before any of the other cars and climbed out in the parking lot to start unloading coolers and gear from the van's cargo area, while the Steinkellers went ahead to the pavilion with the tablecloths. I was holding several twenty-four-packs of soda when Rawlins said, "Hey, isn't that Cameron?"

It was. She looked entirely different in civvies, with a messy, non-regulation ponytail. She was leaning against the hood of a silver car fifty feet away and wrapped around a tall guy with dark, close-cut hair. He looked familiar, too, though it was hard to see his face from this angle.

"Daaaammn, get it, girl!" Sullivan said. "She landed herself a hot— oh, shit, that's Myrick!" She dove behind Nakamura, snorting with laughter.

Stevens stuck out her tongue as if she were gagging. "Ew, I feel like I'm watching my parents make out."

"I think they look good together," said Nakamura.

I squinted. "Is he *smiling*? I didn't know he could do that."

As we watched, both upperclassmen got into the car and left, with Myrick driving. Neither showed any sign of noticing their audience.

"But now one of them has to transfer to another company, right?" Rawlins asked. "They can't be seeing each other and stay in the same one."

"They wouldn't transfer Cameron. She's the company commander still," Stevens pointed out.

"Well, until we hear anything official, we should probably not talk about it," I said. The others readily agreed. We all liked Cameron and Myrick. No one wanted to get them into trouble.

It wasn't until we returned to unloading the van that I noticed the odd, strained look on Platt's face. I bent over a cooler next to him and spoke for his ears only. "You okay?"

He nodded without glancing at me, and then heaved the cooler up and carried it off by himself.

Once the barbeque got underway, he stuck close with the rest of the squad. Despite Mr. Steinkeller's reassurances, I think everyone felt a little wary of the upperclassmen, some of whom had been screaming in our faces earlier that morning. We claimed a picnic table for ourselves under the pavilion, covered it with food, and hung out there together.

In low voices, and only after swearing everyone to secrecy, we filled in the group from the other cars on what we'd seen between Cameron and Myrick.

"Good for them," said Gambini.

"Sucks about Myrick having to transfer, though," Diaz added.

I spotted Mrs. Steinkeller approaching and quickly hushed them before she overheard.

"Are y'all having a good time?" she asked.

We chorused, "Yes, ma'am," in unison, and she laughed.

"Everyone has enough food and drink, right? There's plenty where it came from."

We demurred that we couldn't possibly eat any more, but after she had moved on to the next table, I said, "Actually, I could use another can of soda. Anyone else want one, while I'm up?"

Nearly everyone said yes. A few minutes later, I said, "Okay, let me make sure I have this. That's two regular Cokes, one diet, four Mountain Dew, two Sprite, and a Dr Pepper?"

"And whatever you're having, Dad," Seeger added.

I laughed. "Yeah, I think I'm also going to need an extra hand. Hey, Platt, wanna help?"

He looked up, shrugged, and stood to follow me over to the coolers. We weaved through the tables and the crowd to where they were set up, on the grass at the edge of the pavilion closest to the parking lot. I opened one to start pulling out cans and handing them to him.

"Do you really think Myrick will be transferred?" he asked, softly, as I gave him a Mountain Dew.

Was that what was bugging him? Myrick *had* been the one to convince him to stay, I remembered.

“One of them has to,” I said. “But, hey, it’s not like we’d never see him again.”

His mouth twisted, and then he said, “The Dr Pepper is in that blue one on the end.”

The path under the pavilion was blocked with people, so I looped around the back of the coolers to get it. Platt trailed about a yard after me. I was bending to open the lid when I heard, “Well, if it isn’t the little pissant pleber.”

Without thinking, I spun around, took two steps, and pushed Platt further behind me, so I was directly between him and Belcher.

Our former squad leader smirked at us through a beard. “Aww, are you two boyfriends now?”

A crystal clear image came into my mind: my fist connecting with his nose, red blood spurting across my knuckles, the sound of bone cracking, him sprawling on the grass at my feet. I held myself stock-still and kept my voice tranquil as I said, “You have ten seconds to leave, Belcher.”

He ignored me. “Look, it’s the rest of the pissant squad!”

Out of the corners of my eyes, I saw them, too, coming up to stand silently on either side of Platt. I widened my stance and motioned with one hand for them to stay back. To Belcher, I said, “Five seconds.”

We stared each other down for three of them, with the sun beating on our heads and hot blood rushing in my ears.

Then my buddy Klatsky walked up next to us. He was dressed in a tank top and jogging shorts, but he held a badge out for us to see. “Excuse me. Annapolis Police. Can I help you gentlemen with anything?”

Belcher’s gaze went from the badge to my face. I gave him a serene smile.

“No, Officer,” he bit out. “I was just leaving.”

“Parking lot’s that way,” I said, pointing.

He shot one last murderous scowl over his shoulder as he left.

Klatsky addressed the squad. “Okay, show’s over, mids.”

I took my eyes off Belcher's retreating back long enough to check on Platt. He was several shades paler than usual and breathing hard, though when the others turned back to the table, he went with them. I stayed where I was, watching until Belcher got into a car and drove out of the parking lot. Klatsky did, too.

"Friend of yours?" he asked.

I snorted. "Our old squad leader. He was kicked out for hazing. Thanks, by the way."

"No, thank *you* for not decking him," he said, laughing. "I'd've hated to put you in handcuffs."

"Might've been worth it," I mused. "Except Seb would've killed me." I had no idea how I was going to tell him about this. "I gotta—" I jerked my head at the pavilion behind us. Klatsky nodded and gave me a fistbump before walking off.

Sullivan was asking, "What's he doing in Annapolis still?" as I rejoined them.

"Looking for a job, probably," Koch said. "I heard he has to pay back everything the Academy spent on his education for the past two years. That's, like, a fuckton of money."

And all the more reason for him to go after Platt. The kid was silently watching the conversation going on around him while he rolled an unopened can of Sprite between his palms.

"Whatever," Diaz said. "He's not even worth talking about. We'll all have our buddy Platt's back if Belcher tries anything, right?"

Everyone agreed at the same time, and Platt ducked his head to hide the red flush creeping up his cheeks.

Seb's eyes were wide and worried, even though I prefaced it by promising him no one was hurt. I had seriously considered not telling him at all, or at least waiting a few days until I was sure he felt better. But he had a right to know, the same as I would if something similar had happened to him. I could only reassure him as much as possible.

"*Habibi*," I said, "it's okay, really. He left as soon as he saw Klatsky's badge. He never touched me."

"What about Platt?"

"Didn't even get near him. I made sure of it. The kid's a bit shaken up, but he's alright, I think. Everyone rallying around him boosted his spirits."

"Okay, but what if Belcher comes back? He's pissed at both of you."

I shook my head. "We're on the Yard most of the time, where he's no longer allowed. I promise I will be careful during town liberty, and I'll keep an eye on Platt, too."

"As much as he'll let you," Seb grumbled.

"See how hard it is to be on the other side?" I asked, laughing. He lobbed an eraser at the screen, and it bounced off into his lap. I decided a change of subject was in order. "Were you able to finish your homework this morning?"

"Yeah, it's all done. And my mandala for today, see?" He held it up to the camera.

"Pretty," I said. "That reminds me, you owe me one from yesterday, too."

His jaw dropped open. "You're the one who told me to go to bed yesterday!"

"And now I'm telling you to color another mandala," I said, grinning at him. "You could use it."

"I don't have time."

I tilted my head to one side. "You just told me you were done with homework. What, do you have a hot date or something?"

He made a face at me. "I... I have a commission. The guy in the park is paying me to do a portrait of him for his husband's birthday."

Brat, I thought, fondly. "When's the birthday?"

"Two weeks, but I need to leave time for revisions, and if he wants to get it framed."

"Babe, you're already worried about getting your schoolwork done. Maybe now's not the best time to be taking on commissions?"

Sighing, he said, "I know, but I already agreed. I can't back out now."

"Sure you can," I said, smiling. "Just tell him your fiancé's a slavedriver control freak. He'll totally understand."

He rolled his eyes. "Zain."

"Okay, but I want a mandala first. Send me a picture when you're done."

He sighed again, then nodded.

"I have to go," I said. "I have my second-to-last counseling appointment, and we have a lot to talk about."

"Je t'aime."

"Love you, too. Get to coloring."

"Slavedriver."

I stuck my tongue out and ended the call.

Chapter Five

For all Zain's warnings not to overextend myself with the commission, it was actually relaxing to work on something I knew wouldn't be graded. Not as good as drawing strictly for pleasure, but nice nonetheless. It helped to have an interesting subject, too. I worked off the sketches I had done for most of it, until I got to a point where I knew it would be better with a life reference. Then I packed up my supplies and headed to the Square.

I couldn't find Theo anywhere the first day, despite staying for over two hours during the time he was usually performing. He had given me his phone number to let him know when it was done, but I felt weird calling him up out of the blue to model for me. Eventually, I left and worked on a piece for my Basic Drawing class in the studio, since my roommates were blasting music.

The next day, Jagger trotted over and rested his chin on my knee just as I was about to give up again. I rubbed him behind the ear while I looked around for Theo. He was walking towards me from the street, smiling and rolling his eyes at the same time.

"He takes off the second he sees you," he said. Looking down at Jagger, he added, "Unloyal, that's what you are, mutt. Who brings home the kibble, hm? Okay, Quint does, mostly, but still."

"Quint? Is that your husband?" I asked.

"Oh, sorry, didn't I mention his name before? Yeah, it's Quint." He sat on the bench next to me and tilted his head, reading my shirt with a faint frown. "'Property of a Midshipman'?"

I'd forgotten what I was wearing. Theo had been the first to comment on it, and I felt myself flush as I answered. "Uh, yeah, my fiancé gave it to me. He's a student at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. They're called midshipmen."

"So, the dog tags you were chewing on while you drew me the other day?"

"Are his, yeah," I said, blushing harder. How could I keep doing that without realizing?

Theo's eyes softened. "That's gotta be rough. Being away from him, I mean."

I shrugged one shoulder uncomfortably. "We manage. Um, so, I wanted to draw you from life, if that's okay?"

"Whatever you need," he said. "Can I maybe see what you have done? If not, I totally understand. I don't let anyone other than Quint hear my songs until they're finished."

"No, it's okay," I said. "Better for you to see it now, when it'll be easier to make any changes you want." I took the sketchbook out and handed it to him while Jagger nosed at the back of it.

"Sit, Jag," Theo said. "What, you want to see your portrait? Okay, but no licking." He turned the book around. Jagger really did seem to be studying it. I laughed, and he said, "The kids at the hospital like to read to him sometimes. I think he thinks that's what we're doing."

"Is it okay so far?" I asked.

He looked down at the drawing. "Okay? It's perfect. I don't know what you have left to finish, but I'll trust your expert opinion. I love that you have Jagger doing a spin on his back legs, 'cause Quint taught him that trick."

"It was the most dynamic pose," I explained. "He's almost done. It's you I need to focus on."

"Sure!" he said, giving the sketchbook back to me. "I hope you haven't been waiting for me long."

"No," I said. "Well, I tried to catch you here yesterday, but I must've come at the wrong time."

For some reason, his ears turned pink, and he seemed sheepish. "Ah, no, that would've been my fault. Quint and I were having a... um, disagreement, I guess? It's kind of hard to call it an argument when the other person refuses to argue."

"That sounds like my fiancé," I said, smiling.

Theo grinned faintly back. "Yeah? Does yours do the thing where he pretends he doesn't *notice* you're in a bad mood?"

I laughed again. "Yes, constantly. It's like trying to be grumpy at a rock, for all it does."

"Until the rock decides enough's enough and yanks you out of the bad mood whether you like it or not," he said, almost more to himself than to me.

I blinked. *Did he mean...?*

"Anyway," he continued, interrupting that train of thought, "do you want me standing still, or?"

"No, you can perform, just don't move around too much, and try to keep facing me."

"Okay, well it'll probably be best if I do a few songs without Jagger, then. Stay, boy." He got up and walked a couple of yards away across the flagstones, then turned to me. "This alright?"

“Perfect,” I said. While he took his guitar out, I pulled my pencil case from my bag and opened it on the bench. Jagger sniffed it curiously and then lost interest and laid down at my feet.

Theo strummed his guitar a couple of times and made some adjustments to it before he spoke again. No audience had gathered yet, but he projected his voice as though he were surrounded by a crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Theo Calhoun, and I’ll be starting today’s performance with a song I wrote myself. It’s about a... disagreement.”

With my mind still mostly on the portrait, I didn’t pay much attention to the note of humor in his tone on that last word, until he started to sing.

*“Pleeease, won’t you forgive me,
Pleeease, I’m begging for mercy and,
Pleeease, never let you down again.”*

I stopped drawing.

*“You wanted someone to rely on,
I needed someone I could cry on,
And you’ve opened the door,
Now I need more and more,
You have become a part of me,
Can’t you see?”*

To anyone else, it would’ve been exactly what he’d said: a song about a disagreement. I was being ridiculous.

And yet...

*“There is nothing I can do,
So c’m on,
Pleeease, won’t you forgive me,
Pleeease, I’m begging for mercy and,
Pleeease, never let you down again.”*

Even more than the words, the emotion he put behind them brought back countless memories of being over Zain’s knee for a punishment, like Theo had a direct connection to my brain and knew exactly how that felt. *Had* he seen the text where Zain called me brat, and now he was trying to tell me he understood? Or was I reading way too much into it?

*

Zain thought it was the latter, when I told him about it that night, after JJ had gone to gospel choir rehearsal. “Babe, you suspected the same thing about Platt, remember?”

“I didn’t really,” I said. “I just knew something was bugging me, and once I figured out what it was, it turned out to be right, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, true,” he admitted. “I still don’t know about Theo, though. One song that *could* be about a spanking, if you squint—”

“It wasn’t just the song. It was the way he described disagreeing with his husband, too. And I got this... I don’t know, this feeling. Like an instinct.”

“Like gaydar?” he asked, grinning. “Bratdar! No, that sounds like something Tops use to tell if their Brat is hiding something, like my Seb-senses.”

“Oh, shut up,” I grumbled. “See if I ever tell you anything now.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, *habibi*,” he said, though he was laughing. “I’m not disbelieving you, I promise. You were there, and I wasn’t, so you have more information. What are you going to do with it? Just sort of casually ask him, ‘hey, Theo, does your husband spank you sometimes?’”

“No!”

“Well?”

“I don’t know. I probably *am* wrong,” I said. “I just thought it would be nice to know another couple in real life who’s doing this, and would understand.”

“Yeah, I get that,” he said, more serious now. “Sometimes it’d be great to have another Top I trusted to ask for advice. If you see any more clues, tell me.”

I said I would, and we moved on to other things for the rest of the call.¹

I was fairly sure I knew what he’d want another Top’s advice on. He hadn’t brought up the subject of disability accommodations since the day of my quiz, almost like he was worried how I’d react. That day was also my last major high or low. I thought if I could get through the next test without incident, he’d realize I didn’t need them.

My body had other plans.

¹ The extra [Disagreements](#) goes here.

It started when my morning meter reading came back at 298 mg/dl. I lay in bed staring at it and trying to figure out what I'd done wrong. Did I miscalculate a dose? Did I sleep through a low, and now it was rebounding? Was it just the stupid dawn phenomenon — my hormones, liver, and diabetes teaming up to ruin my day for no good reason?

Whatever caused it, the result was the same. I needed to pee, brush the sweaters off my teeth, and drink about a gallon of water, in that order.

The bathroom door was shut. One of my two roommates from the engineering program stood outside it. As I watched, he pounded on it with his fist. "Mark, c'mon man, we're going to be late for class." If the one in the bathroom was Mark, that must make him Caleb. Or was it Calvin? The pair of them had gone to the same high school, and they were attached at the hip.

A few seconds later, the door opened and the other one emerged, along with the unmistakable scent of marijuana. He held out a joint to Caleb-or-Calvin. "Dude, try this."

I turned on my heel and went back into my bedroom, deciding I could hold it until they left.

The smell lingered long after they did, making me wish the residence hall didn't have rules against lighting candles and incense. Of course, it also had rules against drugs, and that didn't seem to be stopping anybody.

I got out of the bathroom as quickly as possible, ignoring Zain's voice in my head telling me to do a ketone test while I was at it. I could do it the next time I needed to pee, which was sure to be in ten minutes.

My vision was blurry, so I had to squint at the time on the microwave as I took a refillable bottle of water from the fridge. When I finally made the numbers out, I swore roundly in French. I'd slept later than I thought. My first class was starting soon, and there was no way I would be ready.

I brought the bottle with me back to my room and propped it between my crossed legs as I shot insulin into my stomach. All my class syllabi were still on the bookshelf. I should check their attendance policies, email my professors to explain why I wasn't coming, make arrangements to get notes from classmates...

Wait, when had I decided not to go? Hadn't I told Zain not long ago that my life didn't stop for diabetes? This would be proving his point.

And yet, the thought of getting dressed loomed in front of me like a mountain. Just the first class, then. I'd take this time to wrestle my glucose back under control, and that way I could make it to my others.

Somehow, I fell asleep before even drinking the water. I woke up halfway through my second class period with another burning need to pee, more sweaters on my teeth, and nausea to top it all off. Blinking away tears, I stumbled to the bathroom again. My roommates were gone this time, thank gods.

The ketone strip turned pale lavender. I didn't need the chart on the side of the bottle to tell me that meant low levels. Not an emergency. Not yet.

I wanted Zain.

He would be in class right now, unable to answer a call or text. It'd only worry him. Still, I wanted him so badly. With me, not hundreds of miles away. His arms wrapping around me even as I tried to shrug him off, making dumb jokes in my ear and guiding me through what I needed to do next.

Stop it, I told myself sternly. *You're fine. You can do this. Test, shot, water.* I made my way to the bedroom again, repeating that to myself. *Test, shot, water. Test, shot, water.*

The meter said I was hovering right under 300, the dose I'd given myself before having had no effect whatsoever. My hand tightened around it as I imagined throwing the damn thing at a wall. I jabbed more units of insulin into my abdomen, too angry to be gentle or do more than the roughest of calculations for the dosage.

Then I forced myself to chug down the full bottle of water, although my stomach rebelled with every swallow. I went to the kitchen, refilled it from the tap, and took it with me as I curled up in bed once more.

The next time I came to, I was lightheaded and shaky as the insulin finally kicked in with a vengeance. My third test of the day told me I was now at 55 mg/dl. Dropping that much that quickly makes everything about the reaction more intense. I scarfed down half my stash of snacks before I could stop myself, feeling like I was about to die of hunger.

Of course, that all but guaranteed I'd be bouncing back up at 261 a couple of hours later.

Zain calls these Giant Dipper Days, after the old wooden roller coaster at the Santa Cruz boardwalk where we met. I have my own, much less cute, name for them, though I have to admit his metaphor is apt. Peaking and plummeting over and over, strapped down, unable to get away until the ride decides it's done with you. I've always been terrified of that roller coaster.

At last, in the early evening, I achieved a number on the high end of my target range, but I didn't feel like celebrating. My head was pounding, and my body was demanding rest due to simple exhaustion now. I put away the mandala I'd been half-heartedly coloring for hours and gave into it.

The Skype ringtone roused me less than forty minutes later. I groaned and pulled my pillow over my ears before its meaning penetrated my foggy brain. Then I was up and sitting at my desk in seconds, trying to look normal as I answered.

"Hey, Z," I said.

His eyebrows twitched. "Wow, that is some epic bedhead you've got going on, babe."

Quickly, I ran my hand through my hair to straighten it. "I was just taking a nap."

Zain blinked at me, and then tipped his chin and smiled. "Really? You look terrible. If this is what naps do to you, I can't imagine why we inflict them on preschoolers."

I said, "I'm fine," and his smile slowly widened in a way that had me shifting in my seat.

"Oh, good, then you'll have no issue with sending me your logs for the past twenty-four hours, right?" he asked, gazing directly at the camera, not at my image on his screen, so it felt like making eye contact. I looked away, to the other desk behind him.

"Where's JJ?"

"Out," he said. "Just you and me here, brat."

He never calls me that with anything other than affectionate, teasing amusement, but still I flushed, knowing I was truly living up to it right now. "I've been up and down all day," I confessed, quietly. "I really am fine now, though. My last test was on target."

Leaning closer to the camera, he asked, "*Habibi*, why didn't you call or text me before?"

"You were in class. You wouldn't have been able to answer."

He tilted his head again. "Remember what I said over Parents' Weekend?"

Tears prickled in my eyes. "You're supposed to be focusing on your education, not worrying about me."

"Okay, maybe a song will make my point better—"

“Zain.”

“—but what one? Hmm... Oh, I know! *Call me, beep me, if you wanna reach me, when you wanna page me, it’s okay, I just can’t wait until I hear my cell phone riii-iing—*”

“Oh my gods.” I buried my face in my hands.

Heedless, he went on, “*Doesn’t matter if it’s day or night, everything is gonna be alright, whenever you neeed me, baby, call me, beep me, if you wanna reach me.*”

“Kim Possible?” I asked, looking at him through my fingers. “Really?”

He gave me a cheerful grin. “That was from the *full* version of the theme song, not just the edited one they play at the beginning of the episodes. Want me to do the whole thing?” He didn’t wait for an answer before launching into it, dancing in his chair. “*I’m your basic, average girl, and I’m here to save the world—*”

I couldn’t help giggling. “No! I get it!”

“Awesome. So, next time?”

“I’ll ‘beep’ you,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I just... I don’t want you to think I’m...”

“Not handling it?” he suggested, and I nodded. “Babe, you’ve had days like that in Hawaii, too. I didn’t think you weren’t handling it then. Why is now any different?”

I knew exactly why. *Telling* him was another thing entirely.

After a few seconds, he casually said, “Y’know, if I were there with you, this’d be the point where I’d put you over my knee.”

My stomach tightened. “I skipped all my classes.”

He actually laughed. “It’s not called ‘skipping’ if you’re sick. And I kinda figured you didn’t go.”

“The attendance policies, though,” I tried to explain. “I looked at them earlier. All my core classes only let you have two unexcused absences before they start dropping your grade, and now I’ve already used one, which means if— *when* this happens again— not to mention I’m behind on everything now, and—”

“Whoa, *habibi*, slow down a sec, okay? Take a breath.” He waited until I did, and let it out shakily, before he went on, “Your health comes first. Classes can be redone. Your life can’t. Got it?”

I blinked away tears. “But you were right about...” Gulping, I made myself say it. “I need to talk to the Office of Student Services about accommodations.”

He nodded, like he’d been expecting that. “I think that’s a wise decision, and one that shows strength,” he said. “Why don’t you make an appointment with them? I’ll stay on with you while you do.”

“Okay.”

Moving the Skype window to one side, I opened the school’s website and navigated to their page. The office hours were already over, but there was an email address to contact them. I wrote a short message requesting an appointment time slot and added Zain’s email to the BCC field before I sent it.

When that was done, he smiled at me, like a warm blanket. “Good job, *habibi*. You don’t need to do anything else today.”

In a small voice, I asked, “Will you talk to me until I fall asleep again?”

“Of course I will,” he said. “Go get ready.”

I went through my pre-bed routine under his watchful eye. He must’ve seen the new bruise from the shot I’d done while I was angry, but he didn’t comment. I crawled into bed with the laptop beside me.

“Close your eyes, babe,” he said. I obeyed. “Good. I’m going to tell you about my chemistry class today. We almost blew something up.”

What?!

“I said *almost*, keep your eyes closed!”

Snorting, I let them fall shut.

“So, it started when JJ decided he wanted to try something....”

I’ll have to get him to tell me the story again sometime, because that’s the last part I remember.

Chapter Six

My counselor glanced at the clock on the bulkhead above his office door. “I think you’ve made great progress over these past few weeks. Do you feel that you can continue on your own with what we’ve talked about?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said.

Despite my doubts at the beginning, the sessions *had* helped. And more than them, Platt telling me I couldn’t have done anything else assuaged a lot of my guilt, though it took seeing Belcher again to make it sink in. I *knew* I’d protected Platt and the rest of the squad in the park as best as I could. Belcher’s actions were, ultimately, his fault alone.

“Good,” my counselor said. “You’re going to make an excellent officer, Zain. If you ever want to come back and speak to me or another counselor again, we’re always here.”

“Thank you.”

We stood up together, and I shook his hand before walking out into the reception area.

Platt was leaving his own counselor’s office at the same time. I stopped, wondering if I should pretend I’d forgotten something so he could have space on the walk back to our company area. He’d just finished a therapy session, after all.

As I hesitated, he opened the door to the passageway, stepped through it, and then held it for me, with an impatient look over his shoulder. Quickly, I moved to grab it and followed him out.

“Hey, how’ve you been?” I asked, walking beside him. “I haven’t seen you since the barbeque.”

“I don’t need a fucking babysitter,” he snapped.

Now I was confused. Did *he* even know if he wanted to be around me or not?

“Well, that’s good,” I said, lightly, “because the last time I babysat, my little sister wound up covered in pizza sauce and glitter.”

He ignored that, and I thought he’d probably continue ignoring me the whole way back across Bancroft, until we went into a stairwell and he stopped in his tracks. I took another two steps before realizing he was no longer next to me. When I turned to look at him, he had the same wary expression he’d worn during our pre-tutoring conversation. I waited.

With his gaze somewhere over my left shoulder, he asked, “Why did you push me behind you when he showed up?”

“Instinct,” I said, because it was the simplest answer I could give. Platt frowned, though, so I shrugged and added, “I’m a protective person. On top of which, having each others’ backs is what teammates do. It’s what friends do. That’s why the whole squad came up and stood with us. And I kept them behind me, too, remember?”

I watched him process that. He blinked a few times and looked down at the deck before saying, “I’m shit at making friends.”

“You’re better than you think you are,” I told him, “and luckily enough, I’m *excellent* at it, so I think we’ll manage. That’s assuming you’d like to be friends?”

He flushed, like he had in the park when Diaz called him ‘buddy,’ and then scowled. “Well, I’m not gonna get all homo and— I mean, touchy-feely and shit.”

I’d take that as a yes. “How’s this: I won’t ever put a hand on you without explicit permission, and the only thing I’ll insist on knowing is your favorite Disney movie, because I *am* going to burst into song at random intervals — it’s a fact about me that you must accept — and I’d rather it be songs you don’t hate.”

Immediately, he said, “The Lion King,” and then turned away and started up the staircase.

I should’ve guessed. He was basically Simba, after all. Which would make me Rafiki.

My come-around session for the next morning was scheduled with Myrick. We hadn’t heard anything yet about him or Cameron transferring, so I reported to his room as soon as JJ and I had our own squared away, knocking smartly on his door and then cracking it open just enough to speak through. “Midshipman Myrick, fourth-class Midshipman Mohyeldin reporting for come-around, sir.”

“Hit a bulkhead,” he replied.

Closing the door, I executed an about-face while saying, “Go Navy, sir,” took one long step forward, said, “Beat Army, sir,” turned sharply to the right, took a smaller step, said, “Go Navy, sir,” and did another right-hand pivot followed by another giant step to bring my nose against the bulkhead beside the door frame. Then I spun on my heel once more with a hearty, “Beat Army, sir.”

All up and down the passageway, other plebes were doing the same thing in front of other upperclassmen's doors, or they were already getting quizzed on the professional topic of the week. I didn't have to wait long for Myrick to come out and start my own interrogation.

He asked tough but fair questions, and I only got tripped up once. Another mid might've dressed me down for it, even though I quickly corrected the mistake. Myrick just studied me for a moment and then gave a short nod. "Good. Come in and I'll sign your pro book."

Something was up. He didn't need to invite me into his room to sign off on my performance; he knew I had a pen of my own. Wondering if I was going to be handed another covert note, I swallowed my questions and followed him in. His roommate was nowhere to be seen.

"Here," he said. I passed him the book and watched him sign it with his own pen. When he was done, he handed it back to me, dropped the pen into a cup full of them next to his laptop, and fixed me with another look. "I heard about the barbeque. Is Platt okay?"

"He... seems about the same as ever, sir," I said. "Which is to say, not quite what I'd call 'okay,' but he's getting there."

"I heard you put yourself between him and Belcher."

"Yes, sir, I did." Who was his source? There had been mids all over, but no one outside our squad had reacted at the time, so I'd assumed the others hadn't noticed.

"Did you know the Steinkellers also sponsor second-class Midshipman Gould?" he asked.

Blinking at the sudden change of subject, I said, "No, sir."

"He was one of Belcher's closest friends here," Myrick said. "And Nakamura wasn't quiet about who he'd invited to that barbeque."

I glanced out the open door to make sure we weren't being overheard before I spoke in a low voice. "Sir, you think Gould tipped Belcher off that Platt would be there?"

Myrick leaned against the desk behind him and shrugged one shoulder, which was the most casual pose I'd ever seen him take, excluding making out with Cameron. "Or Belcher was there to see Gould, which I'm sure is what Gould would claim if anyone confronted him. I'm telling you this because you and Platt should both be aware of the fact that Belcher still has a friend in 21st Company."

Like Platt didn't already have enough to deal with. I sighed heavily and said, "The bastard ought to be locked up."

"I agree with you," Myrick said, "but the Dant felt his past performance merited some leniency. They gave him a choice of a general court-martial or an Other Than Honorable Discharge and repayment of the full cost of his education thus far. He chose the latter."

Cameron had to be his source for that information. As the company commander, she would've been in the room during the Commandant's Hearing. Even I hadn't known the details.

"His past performance was that good?" I asked, skeptically.

Crossing his arms, Myrick said, "He seemed like a different person a couple of years ago, when we were plebes. It wasn't until youngster year that he started to change — or maybe just to show his true colors. He was careful not to go over the line, at least not in any reportable way. On paper, he was an outstanding midshipman, which is how he got assigned to Plebe Summer detail in the first place."

Where he couldn't resist abusing the power they'd handed to him. I wondered for the first time about Myrick's past relationship with Belcher. It sounded like they'd been acquaintances, at least. Did he feel guilty about not making Belcher's 'true colors' more widely known? Was that why he'd taken such a strong interest in protecting Platt, too?

"You're dismissed," he said, before I could formulate a question. "It's twelve minutes to formation."

Meaning I'd have to run full-tilt to make it to my spot for chow calls on time. I said, "Thank you, sir," over my shoulder as I dashed off.

Since Seb's Giant Dipper Day, I made a point to text him whenever I could, just to show him I was available if he needed me. The messages varied — anything from puns and memes, to instructions for his next edging session, to simply saying I missed him. I sent one in the middle of the night, which got me a solid telling-off on our next Skype call. Figuring he could use the practice, I let him have at it.

"*Honestly*, Zain, it's bad enough when my roommates are playing music and partying until almost two o'clock—"

"They are? Have you tried asking them to keep it down?"

He stopped mid-sentence, his mouth opening and closing wordlessly before he said, "Stop changing the subject, young man!"

I started laughing, and he glared at me. “Sorry, babe,” I said through my giggles. “You’ve got the Look and the Tone down pat, but you really can’t pull off a ‘young man.’”

From across the room, JJ interjected with, “That’s what *she* said,” and then reached out for a fistbump without looking up from his textbook. I happily reciprocated it, while Seb scowled harder at the both of us, muttering something in French.

“You know you can put your phone on Do Not Disturb if it’s bugging you, right?” I asked. “Your roommates, on the other hand…”

“It’s not that bad,” he said, a little too quickly. “I was exaggerating because I was annoyed with you.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I haven’t told you about my appointment with Student Services today yet.”

Oh, now who’s changing the subject? I thought, but I let him do it because I did want to know what had happened with arranging his accommodations. I was kind of surprised he even brought it up with JJ in the room.

“Hang on.” Pulling out my earbuds, I plugged them into the headphone jack before fitting the speakers into my ears. “Okay, what happened?”

He ducked his head. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“But it’s easier for you this way, right?”

Rather than answer, he quietly said, “*Merci*,” and then shifted around a bit, probably getting into a lotus pose. When he was comfortable, he went on, “They told me they can talk to my professors about turning that day I skipped into an excused absence, and rescheduling tests as needed, but first they want a letter from a doctor. So I have to find an endo here.”

“Well, it’s about time you did that anyway,” I said. “Don’t you have the list of recommendations from Dr. Johnson?” She had been very helpful about locating endocrinologists in New York that would accept his parents’ insurance.

He made a face. “Yeah.”

I grinned. “You haven’t even looked at it, have you?”

Sighing, he said, “Why did I need to before? I’m just going to pick the closest one and call them to make an appointment.”

“Okay. When?”

“Tomorrow... morning. First thing, I swear!”

I couldn't help laughing again at his eagerness to convince me he meant it. “I didn't say anything, babe.”

“No, but you were giving me that *patient* look,” he muttered.

“I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about,” I said, and he rolled his eyes at me.

Chapter Seven

My diabetes invades every single part of my life. Sometimes it's a full-frontal assault, so I see the enemy coming from miles away and can arm myself. Other times it's a siege, surrounding me, patiently waiting, wearing me down with no effort at all. The worst are the ambushes, springing out of nowhere and sucker-punching me flat on my back. Always, *always*, I am outnumbered, even with Zain fighting right beside me.

Because I had promised him, I called the closest endocrinology office in the morning. The receptionist said they had an open appointment slot in ten days. I took it, read my insurance information over the phone, and told myself it was a peace treaty. It felt like surrender.

Walking to Washington Square to give Theo the finished drawing was a welcome distraction afterward. He was sitting on a bench near his usual spot, and he smiled and got up when he saw me.

"Hi," I said. "No Jagger?" Petting the dog always calmed me.

"Nah, I wanted to get it framed right away, before anything can happen to it, so I figured I'd leave him home," he replied. "Here's your payment." He handed me an envelope in exchange for the folder I was holding. Nervously, I watched him open it and look down at the drawing.

"If you want to make any changes, it's fine—"

"Seb, this is brilliant!" he cut me off, smiling from ear to ear. "Quint's going to *love* this. Thank you."

My cheeks heated. "Well, thank *you* for the money. I'm going to put it toward a bus ticket and hotel room in Annapolis over Columbus Day weekend, to see Zain."

"Worked out well for both of us, then," he said, cheerfully. "I don't suppose you know any custom framing places? I've never done this."

"Um, there's one I go by on the way to the pharmacy," I said. "I haven't used it, but one of my professors said they're pretty good."

"Mind showing me where?"

We walked to the shop together, with Theo excitedly explaining his plans for Quint's birthday the whole way. When we got there, he said, "Could you do me a favor and come in too? I'm sure you have a better eye for this than me."

I helped him choose a simple black walnut frame with a snow white and charcoal double-mat. By the time we were done, I had to go straight to my afternoon class. Theo bid me goodbye outside the building. I thought that might be the last time I'd see him, other than occasional sightings in the Square.

Between Zain's schedule and both our roommates, it was difficult to find a moment for... intimacy. And yet he told me, quite cheerfully, that I wasn't going to be allowed to come unless he could watch. Around the same time, he started sending me a text early each morning, with directions for that day's edging.

Use three fingers to open yourself up. Deep.

No touching bare skin today, my boy. Keep your briefs on and send me a picture of the wet spot your pre-come makes. Don't change out of them until tomorrow.

Right when you think you can't possibly take any more stimulation without losing control, play with your nipples for a full minute.

He drove me insane. The bastard knew it, too. He kept casually dropping "my boy" into our Skype calls, as JJ sat right behind him, and then grinning mischievously when I flushed and shifted in my chair.

Once, I almost called him "sir" in response. I caught myself at the last moment, and what came out was "yes, s-sssunshine." Instantly, he and JJ started singing duet of "You Are My Sunshine," like they'd been cued. I couldn't decide which of them was a worse influence on the other.

After about a week of this, we'd broken our previous record of one month without release. I texted Zain that, hoping he would take the hint. His answer was a simple *I know*.

He also knew what I meant, I had no doubt, but he wasn't going to give in easily.

Finally, when I was on the verge of begging, I overheard Mark, Calvin, and Travis in the apartment common room talking about a "really sick party" they'd been invited to the next day at some mansion in the Hamptons. They were skipping classes to get there on time and wouldn't be back until the morning after. Which meant I'd have the place to myself, since the British guy always went to his girlfriend's on Friday nights.

I texted Zain immediately, in the middle of his study period.

JJ has a gospel choir performance tomorrow evening, right?

Yeah, why? he replied.

My roommates are going to be out, too.

I watched the indicator that he was writing back for what seemed like ages.

Going to take advantage of the peace and quiet to get ahead on your homework, then? ;)

Oh, gods, he was making me *ask*. My pulse quickened and I grew half-hard in my pajama bottoms. Turning bright scarlet, I typed, *I'd like to come, sir. Please?*

Hmmm... I don't know, he wrote back, and I could imagine the exact evil smile on his face. *We'll have to see if you're a good boy when I call. No touching until then.*

Quickly, I pulled away the hand that had somehow drifted under my waistband. *Yes, sir.*

That's my boy. It's getting late. Sweet dreams.

My subconscious filled them with him, spinning fantasy after vividly tantalizing fantasy. I jolted awake seconds from climax more than once.

Zain wasted no time when Skype connected. He was wearing his earbuds and a heavy-eyed look of pure dominance that sent shudders of *want* straight into my bones.

Merde, I thought. If he teased me, I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold back.

I needn't have worried. He said, "We're going to make a new kind of record tonight, my boy. I want to see how many times you can come in a row."

All my higher cognitive functions stopped working for a few seconds, leaving me frozen and staring at him.

He smirked. "You should get started, babe."

So I did.

At the end of his free period, our new record was set at four. Four *incroyable, étourdissant* orgasms, the last of which left my entire body spent and all my muscles aching with pleasure.

He declared that “a good first run,” and stayed on with me, gently harassing until I summoned the energy to test my glucose. It was on the low side for pre-bedtime. I ate a snack before taking my Lantus, to prevent going hypoglycemic overnight.

I don’t know if he kept the call open after that. Deep, tranquil slumber — the kind I hadn’t had since seeing him over Parents’ Weekend — claimed me.

Nearly every mid had town liberty on Saturday afternoons, including him, but while most of his classmates were hanging out at their sponsor families’ houses or in downtown Annapolis, he stayed behind to check in with another Skype call. I tried not to feel guilty about that.

“Hey, I’m going to be in DC for the Navy Five Miler tomorrow, and they’ll all be stuck on the Yard again, remember?” he said, reading me like a book, as usual. “I think this is a fair trade. And anyway, I wanted to debrief.”

I rolled my eyes. “It was sex, not a military operation.”

Still, he insisted on talking me through it. I could practically see him making mental notes for the next time he wanted to pull me to pieces and put me back together again. Hanging up, I was once more under orders to edge daily, and my blood hummed with arousal.

My roommates got home from the party a few hours later. They were struggling to unlock the door for so long that I went to help them, but halfway across the common room, it finally burst inward. Mark shoved past the other two and dived into the bathroom. I heard him retching as Calvin and Travis both staggered to the couch and collapsed in a heap.

“Fuck, Mark, do you have to be so fucking loud when you puke?” Calvin moaned.

My phone started to ring, and all three of them made noises like they were dying. I backtracked to my room, closing the door before picking it up.

It was Theo. I frowned. Had something happened to the drawing?

“Hello?”

“Seb!” he answered, sounding ebullient. “Quint *loved* it. He said it was the perfect gift, and he wants to be introduced to the artist. Wanna come over for dinner tonight? I can be there to pick you up in about five minutes.”

“What, *now*?” I asked.

“I know it’s short notice. If you have other plans, how about tomorrow?”

From the bathroom came the sound of Mark vomiting again. At least, I hoped he was still in the bathroom.

“Actually, now is great,” I said. “Only, I’m a vegetarian.”

“Oh!” Theo said. “That’s no problem. Quint likes to do all-vegetarian days sometimes. I’ll come get you out front of your building, okay?”

“Okay.”

I grabbed my bag and headed downstairs, making sure to shut the apartment door very gently behind me.

He hadn’t been exaggerating when he said five minutes. I saw Jagger first, trotting along beside Theo without a leash at the end of the block, and as I went to meet them halfway, the dog woofed and broke into a run. Crouching, I greeted him with scratches behind his ears.

“Hey, Jag! I missed you, puppy.”

“No one ever misses *me*,” Theo quipped jovially as he joined us. “I’m just Jagger’s backup dancer.”

I laughed. “No, I missed seeing you in the Square all this week, too.”

At that, he lost some of his energy and shrugged one shoulder. “Yeah, I was taking some time to be with my band.”

“I didn’t know you had a band,” I said, standing again.

“Well, I’m not sure I do anymore,” he replied, and I felt terrible. Before I could apologize, he said, “C’mon, my building is literally just blocks from here. I didn’t realize how close we were until you pointed out your dorm on the way to that framing place. Which, by the way, thank you. It came out beautiful.”

“I’m glad,” I said, walking next to him with Jagger between us.

“So, when did you become a vegetarian?”

“Um, conception, I guess?”

Theo’s eyebrows furrowed together, and I knew what his next question would be. “Wait, you’ve *never* eaten meat? Ever?”

My speech for this is even more practiced than the one about my diabetes. I took a deep breath and launched into it. “Both my parents are Buddhists, and vegetarianism is one of the precepts of Buddhism. It’s considered a good thing to do, not a requirement. They didn’t forbid my siblings and I to eat meat. It was just never around, and when they explained why, it made sense to me.

“I started actually telling people I was a vegetarian at five, but my mom says that’s only because I couldn’t pronounce the word before then. When I was three, my uncle tried to feed me a hamburger, and I screamed and threw it on the floor. Or so I’m told.”

“Wow,” he said. “A), that’s the most I’ve ever heard you talk, and b), aren’t you curious to know what bacon tastes like?”

I made an involuntary face. “Are you curious to know what *dogs* taste like?”

He glanced down at Jagger and then scrunched up his nose. “Okay, good point.”

“Sorry, that was too blunt.”

“No,” he said. “My question was insensitive. It’s fine.” We walked in silence for a few seconds before he asked, “How are your classes going?”

The conversation went more smoothly from there. He told me about going back to school to earn his own degree in music when he was even older than me.

“It was such hard work, but it was worth it. Of course, it helped having Quint around to support me and make sure I didn’t slack off,” he said. That sparked my suspicions about him being a Brat again, yet it wasn’t enough to make me sure.

I got another sign when we reached the next crosswalk. Jagger had been pausing at each one until we gave him the go-ahead, but at this one, Theo pulled a leash out of his pocket and clipped it to the dog’s collar.

He saw my puzzled look, grinned sheepishly, and said, “Technically, he’s only supposed to be off-leash while I’m performing. I’d, uh, appreciate it if you didn’t mention this to Quint?”

“Oh,” I said. “I won’t tell him.”

“Thanks. Here we are.”

The front of the building was a patchwork of red brick, glass, and metal vents, like a chimera of a pre-war townhouse and a sleek skyscraper. Printed on the window and the triangular metal awning over the sidewalk were the words *Avalon Bowery Place*. Theo took out a keychain from his pocket and held a leather fob against the small black box next to the door. When it buzzed, he pushed the door open, and I followed him and Jagger into the lobby.

“Evening, Mr. Calhoun,” said the bald man sitting behind the reception desk on our right.

“Hey, Rick, have a good one,” Theo replied as he led me to the elevators.

I tried to conceal my surprise. I hadn’t expected a street musician to live in such a fancy building. But then, my own parents were proof that a job wasn’t necessarily an indicator of wealth, thanks to my mom’s family money. And Theo had mentioned that Quint was a doctor.

Nonetheless, it was hard not to be impressed when we stepped into his apartment. It had a spacious, open floorplan, with honey-colored hardwood floors, furniture that looked both expensive and comfortable — if a bit too on the contemporary side for my tastes — and floor-to-ceiling windows letting in plenty of light.

Theo stopped just over the threshold, in the kitchen, and unclipped Jagger’s leash. The dog went immediately to a food bowl on the tiled floor.

“You can put your shoes in here,” Theo said, opening one of the folding doors to our right. I slid my sandals off and set them on the shoe rack behind it, and then moved further into the room to get out of his way.

The kitchen was divided from the rest of the apartment by a peninsula of gray-flecked granite countertop set on light oak cabinets, with two mahogany bar stools pushed against the dining-area side of it. I pulled one out and sat down while Theo put his own shoes in the pantry and then moved to the stainless steel refrigerator.

“Want something to drink? We have water, juice, milk, and soda.”

“Water’s fine,” I said, not wanting to ask if the soda was diet and invite any questions. I wasn’t planning to tell him about my diabetes.

As he took out a glass and poured water from a pitcher into it, he said, “Quint will be home soon. He just ran to Whole Foods to get some ingredients for dinner, and for his birthday party tomorrow. Ice?”

“No, thanks.”

He put the glass down in front of me and then turned back to the fridge and took out a two-liter of Coca-Cola. I watched him pour a drink for himself and add ice cubes while I sipped my own in silence.

“Um.” I searched for something to say and landed on, “This is a really nice place.”

As soon as it left my mouth, I hoped he wouldn’t take it the wrong way, but he just smiled and said, “Thanks. It’s actually our second apartment in this building. We lived a few floors down until recently. Quint wanted one with a guest room so he could have an office to work from home some days. Oh, speak of the devil, that’s probably him coming down the hallway.”

The door opened to let in a tall, broad-shouldered man in his late forties, judging from the patches of silver at the temples of his curly black hair. He was carrying two reusable shopping bags in one hand, and when he saw me, he smiled kindly, the corners of his eyes crinkling behind his glasses.

“Are you Seb?”

“Nah, I just found a random kid off the street and dragged him up here,” Theo said.

Quint shot him an amused look. “Angel, would you put these on the counter for me, please?”

I watched Theo cross the room and tug his husband down for a kiss before he took the bags. When Quint’s hand was free, he cupped it around the back of Theo’s neck to hold him still as their lips met again.

They were both quick, chaste pecks, and yet there was such intimacy in them, I felt the constant ache of missing-Zain that I carried around in my gut suddenly sharpening to a fine point. I fixed my gaze on the countertop until I was sure there were no tears in my eyes, and when I looked up again, Quint was standing in front of me on the other side of the peninsula.

“Quint, this is Seb. Seb, Quint,” Theo said, pointing to each of us in turn with a cucumber he’d taken out of one of the shopping bags.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said the older man. He held out his hand, and I gave him my own. I saw his eyes flick to the medical alert bracelet on my wrist as we shook. “I will treasure that drawing for the rest of my life,” he said, “truly.”

The moment he let go, I turned the bracelet so the metal plate was on the inside, where it was less noticeable, and covered it with my other palm. Blushing from a combination of that and his praise, I said, “I’m glad you liked it.”

“He *loved* it,” said Theo. “He almost cried. It was awesome.”

Quint raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you implying you *want* me to cry?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘want,’ exactly,” Theo replied, grinning, “but you make *me* cry often enough. It’s only fair.”

Was that another sign? I wondered. *He could just mean Quint’s really romantic, couldn’t he?*

But that wouldn’t explain the odd, puzzled frown Quint was giving Theo, or Theo’s look of complete innocence. Then I saw Quint catch sight of the glass of Coca-Cola, and both his eyebrows went up.

“Didn’t we say that soda was for the party tomorrow?” he asked. His voice was gentle, and yet some quality in it made me feel a ghost of the same sense of foreboding I get when Zain tilts his head and smiles.

Under the full force of it, Theo looked as cool as the cucumber he was still holding. “Did we? Doesn’t sound like something I’d say.”

Quint blinked, slowly, and I was suddenly very aware of the tension between them. It pinned me to my seat. After a moment, Quint walked around his husband — calmly taking the cucumber on the way — and stood between him and the glass.

“Out of the kitchen, please,” he said. “You can sit next to Seb while I cook.”

Theo looked from Quint to me, and then smiled and sauntered around the peninsula to take the other bar stool. Now I was almost certain they were in a discipline relationship, yet I couldn’t make sense of his behavior. Was he *trying* to get in trouble?

Quint, meanwhile, poured the glass of soda down the sink and started unpacking the shopping bags. Most of the groceries went into the fridge, but he left some on the counter. As he worked, he said, “I thought I’d make a tofu stir-fry for dinner. Seb, do you have any food allergies?”

“Um, no,” I said, glancing between them uncertainly. Then I remembered my manners and added, “Stir-fry sounds delicious. Thank you both for inviting me.”

“Least we could do,” said Theo, cheerfully, as if nothing had happened. “Oh, wait, let me show you the drawing all finished and everything!” He hopped from his stool, disappeared down the hallway with Jagger at his heels, and came back a moment later holding the framed picture. “See?”

"It came out nice." I took it from him and traced over the line of the Washington Arch in the background with my fingernail, being careful not to smudge the glass.

Taking a wok and a cutting board from one of the cupboards, Quint said, "You're very talented. Theo told me you're going to Cooper Union?"

"Yeah, I'm a freshman. Just started a few weeks ago."

"Did you grow up around here?" asked Theo.

"No," I said as I handed the drawing back. He put it down on the dining table behind us before sitting beside me again. "I grew up in Santa Cruz, California, and for the last few years, Zain was stationed in Hawaii."

Theo frowned. "Zain's your fiancé who's off at military school, right?"

Nodding, I said, "He's a Marine in his plebe year at Annapolis. That's what they call freshmen."

"So you're here in the city all by yourself?" Theo asked.

As we spoke, Quint had laid a damp towel out on the counter in front of us and put the cutting board on it, and he was now chopping vegetables. Theo gave him a meaningful look after I nodded again. If Quint noticed it or knew what it meant better than I did, he showed no sign.

"Theo grew up in Brooklyn, and I'm from Boston," he said. "I don't think either of us has ever been to Hawaii. Have you, angel?"

"No. It'd be fun to go someday, though," said Theo. "I could learn to surf." He made a 'hang-loose' gesture and mimed riding a surfboard. Quint and I both smiled. "Do you surf, Seb?"

"I took lessons when my sister, Keegan, was learning," I said, shaking my head, "but I was never very good at it."

"Does your fiancé?" Theo asked.

"Yes, although he's not that good, either. He says it's still fun."

The subject turned to other kinds of athletics. I found out Quint was a runner. "He gets up early every single morning and goes jogging," Theo said, with an exaggerated eyeroll. "It's crazy."

"Zain does, too," I commiserated. "He even joined the Marathon Club at the Academy. They're doing a five-mile race tomorrow."

Theo shook his head sadly. "It's like a disease." He reached for a piece of celery on the cutting board, but Quint's eyebrow quirked up again, and he stopped. "What?"

"Have you washed your hands?" Quint asked.

"Um... not recently?"

"Wash them, please."

Theo sighed, and then slid off the bar stool and went around to the sink.

It was weirdly fascinating to watch them interacting, even when I felt like I was spying on something private. Quint seemed so placid, I couldn't imagine him raising his voice or getting angry any more than I could with Zain. On the other hand, I could easily imagine him delivering a stern lecture, which Zain would never even dream of doing. And then there was Theo, who was so casual and *obvious*. It took courage, I thought, to be comfortable enough with himself not to hide it.

As Theo pumped soap into his hands, Quint put the wok on the stove and turned the burner on. Quickly, I started counting up carbs for the ingredients spread out on the counter in front of me. Assuming everything got used, and we all took an equal portion.... I touched the tip of my thumb against each of my fingers as I worked through the math, until I was reasonably sure of my insulin dose.

"Is something wrong, Seb?"

I blinked, suddenly registering that Quint had paused in the middle of gathering the ingredients and was giving me an odd look. "Yes— I mean, no, everything's fine," I said. "Um... where's your...?"

He nodded behind me. "It's down the hall, second door on your right."

"Thanks." I took my bag and retreated to the privacy of the bathroom for my test and shot. Then I flushed the toilet and washed up again before coming out.

In the hallway, I overheard Quint's voice, so low I could barely make out the words, saying something that sounded a lot like "young man." I froze, still standing out of sight from the kitchen.

"But I'm right," Theo said, clearly audible, "and he's on his own here!"

"We will finish discussing this later," Quint replied.

Discussing what?

Not that it was any of my business. I stayed where I was for a few more seconds before coming back out to join them.

Quint was at the stove, adding mushrooms to the stir-fry, while Theo took down bowls from a cupboard. The older man looked over his shoulder at me and smiled. "It'll be ready in just a few minutes. Would you like another glass of water?"

"Um, sure."

"I'll get it," Theo said. He appeared subdued. I wanted to show him my sympathy, but couldn't think of how, without giving away that I knew too much.

His energy bounced back as we ate, though. Soon, he was making me snort with laughter at tales of people dropping weird things into his guitar case instead of money, while Quint smiled and interjected with quiet comments now and then.

Our bowls were nearly empty and I had lost track of time when I heard my phone playing "Lucky" from my bag and realized I hadn't told Zain where I was.

"I'm sorry, that's my fiancé," I said, already reaching for it. "I don't want to be rude—"

"It's fine," Quint reassured me. "Go ahead."

The ringtone was almost to the second verse by the time my fumbling fingers dug the phone out. I hit the green circle to answer as I stood up and moved towards the living room furniture.

"Hello?"

"Hey, babe! Where are you?" he asked. "I just tried to Skype and you didn't pick up."

I winced as a stab of guilt hit me. "Z, I forgot. I went to Theo's for dinner and I didn't notice it was so late, and I... *je suis tres désolé.*"

"*Habibi*, it's okay, relax," he said, in his take-a-deep-breath tone. "I'm glad you're making friends."

"I can leave now, and we can still talk before your liberty's over," I suggested.

"Yeah, what would they think if you take a call from me and then rush home, hmm?" he asked. "That'd *really* make me seem like a slavedriver. We already talked once today, and I've got time tomorrow before we leave for the race. Why don't I call you around eight in the morning?"

“Yeah, okay,” I said, pacified.

“Great. Now go back to your dinner party and have fun,” he said. “That’s an order.”

I snorted. “*Je t’aime.*”

“Love you, too. Good night.”

Hanging up, I turned to my hosts. “I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s not a problem at all,” Quint said.

Theo was in the kitchen, taking something out of the pantry. He came back to the table as I sat down and held out his hand. “Fortune cookie?”

“Oh, no, thanks,” I said. Just one serving has twenty-four grams of carbs.

He shrugged. “Okay, more for me. Quint, here’s yours.” They each unwrapped their cookie and broke them open. Theo immediately started laughing. “Mine says ‘Some men dream of fortunes, others dream of cookies.’ That’s amazing.”

“I think mine is supposed to be for you, angel,” said Quint. He read aloud: “‘Birds are entangled by their feet and men by their tongues.’”

Theo made an indignant noise, but he was smiling still. “Seb, are you sure you don’t want to break one open just to see what your fortune is? I’ll eat it.”

“Okay.” Taking the last cookie from his hand, I unwrapped it, snapped it into two pieces, and pulled out the slip of paper.

You are extremely loved. Don’t worry. ☺

I blinked at it. When did Zain start writing fortunes?²

² The extra [The Gift](#) goes here.

Chapter Eight

Seb gave my declaration that I wanted to do a debrief on our scene a roll of his eyes. “It was sex, not a military operation.”

I grinned. I don’t think he realizes how much strategizing and tactics go into both, from my point of view — at least, when I have a specific goal in mind for the scene, like I had with that one.

Operation De-Stress Seb, I’d privately dubbed it. His roommates’ party-animal antics were getting worse, from what I could tell, plus he was dealing with arranging his disability accommodations on top of regular schoolwork and diabetes management. A nice, constant edge of arousal offered a great distraction.

I wound him up as much as I could without being able to actually touch him, through texts and covert teasing, and then yanked all that tension right out of him. He looked a lot more rested now. Mission accomplished, but I still wanted to hear his take on it, especially since it was the first time we’d played with multiple orgasms.

All I said, though, was, “You’d be surprised at the similarities, babe. So, thoughts?”

“You’re evil. That’s my main thought.”

I laughed. “Yeah, I’m a wicked villain, and you hated every second of it, I’m sure.”

He blushed adorably for me and admitted, “Well... not *every* second.”

I had my headphones plugged into the computer again, and I knew there was no one in earshot on his side, either, yet I had to turn the volume up to maximum just to hear him.

“Speak up a teeny, tiny bit, okay?” I said, and waited for him to nod before asking, “Any seconds you liked more than others?”

“Um... after the— the third time,” he stuttered, louder, but reddening more, “when you told me, ‘I didn’t say you could stop,’ that was... good.”

“Yeah?” I narrowed my eyes in consideration. “I thought I was maybe pushing you too much. Didn’t it hurt to keep going?”

“It’s hard to describe... It was just an intense sensation, not really pain,” he said. “And knowing I was doing it because you wanted me to, that made it easier.”

"I gotta admit, the noises you made then were my favorite part," I said, just in case he hadn't deduced that from how I'd climaxed myself while listening to him.

He ducked his head, but I could see the hint of a smile on his lips.

Slowly, I pried all the other highlights out of him, filing away ideas for later, and then turned to the more difficult side of the equation. "What about the parts you didn't like?"

His answer this time was instant and emphatic. "There weren't any."

I snorted. "Really, not one? Okay. I'll tell you what I didn't like was not being there with you, especially afterwards. I wanted so badly to get you cleaned up and settled in myself, and then have some cuddle time. But you were just fine with that, I guess."

"Well... no," he said. "Okay, fine, *tu me manquais*, especially then."

"I miss you too, babe," I said, smiling. "See, not so hard, right?"

"Mhm."

"You up for continuing the edging?"

Another flush bloomed over his cheeks. "Yeah."

"I wish I could watch every day," I said, and then an idea struck me. "Hey, how would you feel about recording a session for me?"

At that, he looked slightly panicked, and I cursed myself for springing it on him without any warning.

Leaning closer to the computer, I said, "*Habibi*, it's fine to say no. I'm not going to be upset. It was just a spur-of-the-moment thought."

He fidgeted and swallowed. "I'm not saying no. Can I... can I think about it?"

"Of course you can! Okay, how's this: I won't mention it again. You can bring it up if you want to, or not. No pressure at all."

"Okay."

"I have to go so I can finish my homework. I won't have any time tomorrow, with the race, or I'd stay on with you," I said, regretfully. He looked calmer, but I wanted to give him something to make up for that misstep before I left him. "Your roommates won't be back for awhile, right?"

With a puzzled frown, he said, "Yeah."

"Good." I looked right into the camera and pulled out my most dominant voice. "I want you, my boy, to edge while they're gone and be as noisy as you were last night. I want you to whimper and beg like I can hear you. I want you to say out loud every single thing you want me to do to you next time."

Ah, there was the reaction I was looking for: wide, dark eyes as a little shiver of desire went through him.

"Can you do that for me?"

Licking his lips, he said, "Yes, sir."

"That's my good boy," I praised. "Now, I gotta go. Love you."

"Je t'aime."

I ended the call and was taking my earbuds out when I heard a faint noise from the passageway that made me look over to my closed door. In the crack underneath, I saw someone's shadow. Frowning, I got up, took two steps, and opened the door before they could move.

Platt stared at me. I stared back. He was bright pink from the top of his head all the way to his neckline, and holding a calculus textbook, which he dropped down in front of his crotch a half-second too late to keep me from seeing his erection.

Oops.

"Well, this is awkward," I said, deliberately cheerful and non-threatening.

But he was already backing away. "I— sorry, I have to—"

There was a movement from the corner of my eye, and I glanced down the passageway to see Midshipman Gould, Belcher's friend that Myrick had warned me about, coming towards us. I didn't like the look on his face one bit.

"Get in here," I said to Platt, opening the door wider for him. When he didn't move, I put a note of command in my tone. *"Now."*

Then he spotted the upperclassman, too, and scurried past me into the room. I shut the door behind him, flipping the lock just as Gould's footsteps reached the other side. They stopped, and I feared he was going to wait there until Platt had to leave when liberty ended.

A couple of seconds later, though, we heard him walking away. I listened carefully, and when he didn't come back, I turned around. "I think he's gone, but to be safe, you should probably stay here awhile. Myrick told you about him, didn't he?"

Platt nodded, but most of his attention was on my computer screen, where Skype was still open, although the call had ended. Right, I should probably deal with that before things got too weird.

Pulling out my desk chair, I straddled it, crossed my arms on top of the backrest, and grinned at him. "So, I don't know how long you were standing there, but did it seem like I was abusing my fiancé this time?"

He went almost scarlet as he shook his head. "I— I didn't mean to— I wasn't there long— I didn't hear," he said, his words stumbling into each other. "And... I shouldn't have accused you of that. I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine," I reassured him. "I can see how it would've been easy to mistake, out of context, and it's always better to err on the side of caution. If someone *had* been abusing Seb, I would've wanted them to be confronted like you did. It was a very brave thing." After a second's debate, I decided to leave it at that, unless he wanted to talk about it more. He probably didn't realize I'd seen his body's reaction. "Anyway, I'm guessing you came here with that textbook for some reason, right?"

He dived on the change of subject like a drowning man going for a life preserver. "I was having trouble with this problem, and I remembered you tutoring Diaz and Nakamura."

So he was coming to me for *help*? Well, knock me over with a feather.

I hid my surprise, though, and said, "Sure, let's take a look. You can use JJ's chair. He's going to be at his sponsor family's for the rest of the day, probably, and he won't care." That reminded me, it was unusual for any plebe to be hanging around the Yard on a Saturday afternoon. As Platt moved the chair over to my desk, I asked, "Do you have a sponsor?"

"No," he said, sitting down. "I didn't sign up for one."

I hadn't, either, only because I didn't want them taking up time I could spend on Seb. It was a shame that Platt hadn't, though. He could've used a place to go away from the Academy. I wondered if JJ's might be willing to "adopt" him. I made a mental note to ask him about it when he got back, and then turned to the problem Platt was pointing out in his textbook.

From that point, the conversation was focused on math, but it was the longest and most civil one I had ever had with the kid. At the start, he put more than two feet of personal space between us, and I made sure not to encroach on it, letting him set the boundaries. Gradually, he

moved his chair closer. It was within eight inches of mine by the time he was working on the last assigned question

“So, this is the answer,” he said. “Right?”

I smiled. “Yep, you’ve got it. Good job.”

He almost looked pleased for a split second. Then he was closing the textbook with his homework paper still inside it and going towards the door. “Thanks for explaining the problems.”

“Hang on,” I said, “let me check for Gould.”

He didn’t wait. I followed him a couple of steps out into the passageway and confirmed there were no upperclassmen to be seen anywhere nearby, but escorting him back to his room would probably piss him off. Reluctantly, I let him go alone, and simply watched until he turned the corner.

I had the perfect opening line for my nightly Skype with Seb — “So, I accidentally gave Platt a boner.” — but when I called, there was no answer. I tried him on his cell phone, and found out he was having dinner with the musician who had bought a portrait from him. After I assuaged his guilt over missing the call, I suggested doing it the following day instead, while JJ was at chapel and before I left for my race.

I meant to still use that line, until he beat me to it with an even better one. The moment I saw his face on my computer screen the next morning, he said, “Theo is *definitely* in a discipline relationship.”

“For serious?” I asked. “You have proof?”

He nodded. “I overheard his husband call him ‘young man.’”

“Babe, you called *me* that a few days ago, remember?”

Rolling his eyes, he said, “Yeah, but Quint pulled it off. And the Tone, *and* the Look.” He recounted everything, and I had to admit it was all pretty damning evidence.

“Okay, I’d say you’re right. What are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “They invited me to Quint’s birthday party today, but I turned it down because it sounded like there would be a lot of people there, so I’m not sure when I’ll even see them again.”

“Well you can’t stop now, babe!” I was getting excited at the prospect of knowing another Top and Brat, too. “You still have Theo’s phone number, right? You should call him and arrange to meet up again.”

He gave me a look like I’d asked him to diffuse a bomb.

“Never mind, forgot who I was talking to,” I said, laughing. “It’s time for me to get ready for my race. I’ll think about what you could do while I’m gone, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Wish me luck!”

He smiled. “*Bonne chance.*”

For marathon runners, it’s more about achieving personal goals than winning. I knew the time I wanted to hit, and the pace I needed to make it, and everything was smooth sailing until right around mile four. Just before the mile marker was a water station. I slowed down enough to grab a paper cup from one of the volunteers as I passed, and then moved back towards the middle of the road to give other runners room.

That’s when I thought I saw Belcher.

I didn’t get a good enough look to be sure it was him. The beard and longer, non-regulation hair he’d adopted since being kicked out of the military had made him nearly unrecognizable at the barbeque. One second, I spotted someone who *might* have been him leaning against a barrier on the side of the course, and the next, he’d disappeared into the crowd. I craned my head around, my heart pounding as I tried to get another glimpse of him, but it was too congested, and there were still runners on all sides of me, preventing me from stopping.

So what if it was him? I thought. *Doesn’t mean he necessarily came because I’m here.* It was a military event. Maybe he just missed the culture, or he knew some of the other runners. *Probably wasn’t him, anyway.*

Still, it unsettled me enough to throw me off my stride, and I spent most of the last mile making up for it. I crossed the finish line, panting hard, within seconds of the time I’d planned.

We returned to the Yard in early evening. Before even going to my own room, I headed to Platt's. Nakamura was there alone. He looked up at my knock on the open door and said, "Hey, Dad!"

"Hey," I replied. "Know where Platt is?"

"Told me he was going to get in some extra judo practice, I guess with one of the guys from the club," he said. "They use the little gym in Alumni Hall, I think?"

"Thanks. See ya."

I crossed the Yard as dusk fell, and found the door of the gym Nakamura had suggested was standing open. From within came the smacking sound of something heavy hitting a padded floor with a lot of force. I looked through the doorframe and saw Platt, in a martial arts uniform, standing over Myrick, who was laying on the mat in regular PT gear.

Myrick smiled as he got up. "That was great."

"Thank you, sir," said Platt.

"Now do it again."

Platt moved too fast for me to follow exactly what happened. It looked like he simply grabbed the larger midshipman by the front of his shirt, turned, and flipped him over his shoulder. Myrick landed on his side with another loud *thwack*, and then rolled to his feet.

"Excellent," he said. "This time—" He caught sight of me and stopped mid-sentence. "Mohyeldin, come in."

I walked over to them. "Good evening, sir. Nak told me I might find *you* here, Platt, but he said you were practicing with another member of the judo club. I didn't know you were in it, too, sir."

"I'm not," said Myrick. "I mentioned that I used to teach judo to Platt when I suggested he learn it, so when he wanted some extra instruction today, he came to me."

Platt was frowning at me. "Why were you asking Nak where I was?"

"Because I just got back from running the Navy Five Miler race in DC," I told them both, "and I think I saw Belcher there."

Myrick looked grim, as I had expected, but Platt just closed up again. I couldn't read anything from his expression.

“How sure are you?” Myrick asked.

“Fifty-fifty, really,” I said. “I only got a split-second look. It felt like too much of a coincidence, though, after what happened with Gould yesterday, sir.”

Frowning harder, Myrick glanced from me to Platt. “*What* happened with Gould?”

I wasn’t surprised that Platt hadn’t told him. Briefly, I explained how the second-class midshipman had stood outside my room. When I was done, Myrick pinned Platt with a look that reminded me of one of my first drill sergeants, the one we’d nicknamed Steel.

“Is that why you came to me for extra training, Midshipman Platt?”

“Yes, sir,” Platt said, in a quiet, unwavering voice.

“You should have told me.” He transferred the look to me, and it was even worse. “Both of you.”

“Yes, sir,” I agreed, abashed. He was right. What Gould had done wasn’t reportable in any way, but Myrick had already proved his willingness to stretch regulations to protect Platt. He needed to be kept in the loop.

“If anything like that happens again, to either of you, tell Cameron or me *immediately*,” Myrick said. “I’m going to be transferring to 2nd Company tomorrow, so she will be more easily available. I’ll email both of you my new room number.”

“Aye, sir,” I said. “You’ll be missed in the 21st, sir.”

Platt nodded. I thought I saw his chin tremble the tiniest bit.

“I’m still here if you need me,” Myrick said, more to him than to me. “Now, we’re going to do that throw a few more times, and then I’m going to teach you some submission holds. Mohyeldin, I have no objection to you watching, as long as you stay out of the way.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, “but I’ll be going, if that’s alright.”

He nodded, and I turned to leave as he and Platt exchanged short bows towards each other. At the door, I glanced over my shoulder. It almost looked like they were in a ballroom dancing pose, until Platt twisted and sent Myrick flying over his head onto the mat once more.

Though he be but little, he is fierce, I thought.

I decided not to tell Seb about Gould or Belcher on our call that night. There was no point in undoing all my hard work relaxing him when I couldn't be certain what I'd seen and nothing had happened. Anyway, he was doing a fine job getting stressed out again on his own, as I soon discovered. Well, his roommates were helping a little.

Since the beginning, they'd had loud music playing more often than not when I called, and several times it sounded like there was some sort of party going on. Seb had also told me three of them liked to smoke pot and drink — all typical college kid stuff. I wouldn't have cared, except for how it affected my boy. I could see the constant chaos was getting to him.

"Babe, I'm sure your RA could help you talk to them," I said a few days later, when the noise was so bad we were both having trouble hearing each other, even with headphones. "Doesn't the building have rules about this kind of thing?"

"They don't care unless it's quiet hours, which start at eleven, or if someone complains," he said.

I snorted. "You do realize you could be the one to complain, right?"

"It's fine. I'm going to the drawing studio to work on a project after I hang up, and they'll have quieted down by the time I get back."

"Uh-huh."

He scowled at me. "I am *not* avoiding conflict. I'm just not making a big deal out of it, like *you* are."

Yeah right, brat.

With JJ sitting right behind me, I couldn't say it, but I gave him an amused look and knew he took my meaning when he shifted uneasily in his chair.

We were getting to the point where he would need more than a simple reminder. I had researched possibilities for this when we first started talking about college, and every one of them seemed lacking. The loss of control and physicality of being held are what allows him to feel safe enough to release everything built up inside. Capsaicin cream just isn't the same.

I was thinking I might tell him to buy a bus ticket and bring the hairbrush down to see me on Saturday, but I didn't want it hanging over his head for that long, especially with his second quiz of the year and his appointment with the new doctor both scheduled on Friday. Figuring I'd wait and see how he was afterward before deciding anything, I asked, "Still no Theo at the park, huh?"

He shook his head. "And he hasn't contacted me, either."

"I'm sure it doesn't mean anything, babe. He might just have something else going on at the moment."

"Yeah," he agreed, with a little sigh. I resisted pointing out that he had Theo's number, too.

As I was walking from one building to the next between my first and second Friday classes, he sent me a picture of his daily mandala.

Wow, you did it early today, I wrote back. Feeling better?

Yes, he said. *I'll check in with you after the quiz.*

Okay, I replied, followed by a picture of a winking puppy pointing one paw at the camera, with the caption 'u got it, babe'. He gave me the eyeroll emoji in response.

I kept my phone on me during Marathon Club training that afternoon. Halfway through our course, I felt it buzz and peeled off from the group with the pretense of getting a pebble out of my sneaker.

Glucose only went up to 217 this time, he'd written. It was still high, but it was a lot better than the first time around.

That's great, babe, I said. *How did you do on the quiz?*

Okay, I think. *It was easier knowing what to expect.*

Good job. Going to your endo's now?

Yeah, he replied. *I'm walking over. By the time I get there I'll probably be on target again.*

K, let me know when you're done.

I will.

He finished during my dinner, though, and I couldn't check my phone until I was dismissed from the table. When I did, I found he'd sent me another picture, this time of a form that had 'Cooper Union Office of Student Services: Disability Accommodations Request' written across the top. It was filled out with his information and signed with what I figured must be his new doctor's name, although I couldn't read the signature.

Everything's taken care of, he'd written. I'm dropping this off at Student Services.

The timestamp on both messages was thirty minutes prior, so he was probably back in his room by now. I hurried towards my own to call him. Another text arrived before I even got there.

Went to the park and Theo and Quint were there. They invited me for dinner tonight. Talk to you tomorrow?

As I read it, I slowed to a stop in the passageway. I was torn. He needed friends in the city, and if I told him he couldn't go, who knew when this opportunity would arise again. On the other hand, I needed to make sure he was okay after the day he'd had. Ducking into a stairwell so I was out of view of any passing upperclassmen, I hit the call button. It took him a few rings to answer, and when he did, I could hear street noise in the background.

"Hi, Z."

"Hey, babe. It's fine for you to go over there, I just wanted to hear your voice first. How was the appointment?"

"I told you, everything's set," he said.

"Did they take your A1C and all that?"

He sighed and lowered his voice like he was trying not to be overheard. "Can we talk about this tomorrow, please?"

"Ah, you haven't told Theo and Quint about the diabetes yet, huh?"

"Zain."

"Relax, babe, they can't hear me," I said. "Okay, we'll talk about it tomorrow. I'm going to call you right after SMT." There would still be time then for him to catch a bus if we needed to make it a face-to-face talk.

"Kay," he said.

"Love you! Have fun at dinner."

"*Je t'aime*," he said, and a moment later he ended the call.

He'd sounded normal, not like he was freaked about anything. Yet there was something making my Seb-senses tingle.

Chapter Nine

Theo seemed to vanish into thin air after our dinner. “I’m sure it doesn’t mean anything, babe,” Zain said. “He might just have something else going on at the moment.”

Or it was something I had done or said, or maybe he had only invited me over to be nice in the first place. He’d claimed he wanted to make other plans, but surely he would have been in touch by now if that were true?

I felt more alone in the city than ever.

The day of my second quiz and endo appointment, I got up early to do an extra-long meditation and yoga session before my roommates started making noise. The street outside my window was quiet, too, almost peaceful. I tried to pull some of that calm into myself and hold it there.

Then I spent my morning surrounded by the comforting sounds of art being made. Each student was too wrapped up in their own work to pay attention to me, and the professors circled through us, observing without saying much. Studios were the closest thing I had to a true home here.

After my second class let out, I went back to the apartment for lunch and found it blessedly empty, so I ate in the kitchen rather than taking the food into my bedroom. My glucose was right on target. Still, I could feel my nerves building. I bumped up my insulin dose a little to compensate, then double- and triple-checked that I had everything I needed in my bag, and headed out again.

I felt relatively okay until my professor put the quiz paper facedown on my desk. My heart skipped a beat. I stared at the blank white sheet, thinking, *You’re fine. Pull yourself together. You’re FINE.*

A minute later, she told us to turn them over and begin. My hand shook as I did.

Reading the page, though, I realized I knew the answers and let out a deep breath. Now if I could just write them coherently.

I wanted to rush through, before my body made it impossible to think straight, but that would only stress me out more. Instead, I jotted down key points next to each question, so I wouldn’t forget later. That helped a lot. There weren’t nearly as many scribbles on the paper this time when I turned it in.

My professor dismissed us almost immediately afterward. I found a restroom and did a test. It came back at 217 mg/dl, more than a hundred points below what I'd hit the first time. Still high, yet it felt like a great accomplishment. Maybe I wouldn't even need to use the accommodations.

I texted Zain on the way to the endo's office and promised to check in with him again when I was done. It wouldn't take too long. The doctor just needed to fill out and sign the form.

But after the nurse recorded my height, weight, and blood pressure, she said, "Okay, let's get a sample for your A1C."

"Uh... is that necessary?" I asked.

"It's standard procedure for all new diabetic patients," she said. "The doctor may want to order other tests as well, depending on how the exam goes."

Exam?! Why can't you just look at my medical history and sign the paper? I expected them to maybe ask some questions about how my glucose levels were affecting my schoolwork. Nothing like this.

The nurse was now giving me an impatient look.

"Okay," I said, and let her take the blood sample.

When she was done, she asked, "What kind of meter do you have?"

"Freestyle InsuLinx," I said, pulling it out of my bag. She plucked it from my hand. I watched nervously as she hooked it up to a computer and started downloading my logs.

"While that's running, I'll go get the doctor."

She left, and a few minutes later a tall, burly, bald man came into the room. "Hello," he said, "I'm Dr. Meade."

"Seb Crews," I replied, taking his offered hand.

"Well, Seb, give me a second to look over your history and recent logs, and then we'll talk."

I nodded and waited, tapping my fingers against the paper cover on the exam chair, as he read through everything.

"Hmm," he said, after a while. "You're using pens, not a pump?"

My fingers stopped tapping. "Yeah."

“And you’ve never used a pump?”

I shook my head. The paper crinkled under my clenching hands, sounding incredibly loud, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“I think you should,” he said, still looking at my logs on the computer screen.

NO.

“These numbers are a bit high across the board,” he continued, “and then you have spikes, like this one earlier today, and some bad lows as well. A pump would help to even that all out and get you back on track.”

“It’s— that’s not typical,” I tried to explain, forcing the words out through a tight throat and trembling lips. “It’s only recently.”

He turned to me and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “You’ve just moved here to start school, correct?”

I nodded.

“It’s your first time away from home?”

“I was living with my fiancé for the past few years,” I said.

“Did she do most of the cooking?”

“He,” I corrected, “and we took turns.”

“How have your eating habits changed since moving?”

I paused to think that over.

“Have you been eating out? Fast food? Frozen dinners? Skipping meals or overeating?” he asked, the questions coming one right after the other with no room to breathe.

“N—no! I mean, sometimes I have a frozen meal, and I guess the campus snack bar can be considered eating out, but none of the rest of that.”

“Hmm,” he said again. I got the feeling he didn’t believe me. After a moment, he disconnected my meter from the computer and gave it back. I turned it over and over in my hand while I waited for him to speak. It was like being a bug under a microscope. Finally, he said, “At the

very least, you need to take remedial diabetes education classes, to learn to better manage your levels, and I would like you to seriously consider a pump.”

The nurse came back in, handed him a piece of paper, and left again. As he read it, I tried summoning my inner calm. But it was no longer there. It had all dried up into thick, choking dust.

“Your A1C is 9.2 percent. Do you see why you need these classes?”

Helplessly, I nodded. My A1C hadn’t been over 9 in years. Maybe he was right. Maybe I couldn’t manage without a pump. Nausea swirled in my stomach.

“Last order of business: You have a disability request form?”

I dug it out of my bag and gave it to him. He laid it on his clipboard, checked off a few things, and scribbled a signature at the bottom before returning it to me.

“We’ll be in touch to schedule the classes,” he said. “Do you have any other questions for me?”

I shook my head again, and he ushered me out of the room.

The walk back to campus was in a fog. I got four blocks before remembering I had to update Zain. He’d be eating dinner right now, so I could get away with a text. It took two tries to snap a clear picture of the paper. My hands were trembling, and I knew it wasn’t from a low.

After I dropped the form off in the Student Services mailbox, I headed for Washington Square without a conscious decision. It was home to some of my most pleasant memories in the city, and right now, I needed them.

I didn’t expect to see Theo, yet there he was, performing with Jagger to a crowd of people by the fountain. Even more surprisingly, Quint was sitting on one of the benches nearby. He spotted me at the same time and gave me a quiet smile. “Seb, it’s nice to run into you again. How are you?”

“Fine,” I said. His eyebrows drew together the smallest amount, and I thought for a moment that he was going to press for more, but then he just nodded at the bench next to him.

“Won’t you sit down? There’s a good view of Theo and Jagger from here.”

I hesitated. What if Theo had decided he’d rather not be friends after all, and then he found me sitting with his husband and felt like he had no choice about it? But maybe there was some sort of explanation for his absence.

“I haven’t seen them in a few days,” I said, though it was closer to a week.

Quint nodded. “Theo wasn’t feeling well on Monday, so he’s been staying home. He *has* wanted to make plans with you, though.”

“Oh,” I said. Of course, he was sick. I felt self-centered for thinking it was all about me. Sitting on the bench next to Quint, I said, “I hope he’s better now.”

“He is, thank you.”

As we watched, Theo ended his song, to a round of applause from the audience and a few shouts of “Encore!” and “Do another one!”

He looked over towards Quint, and saw me, too. Grinning, he waved at me. I waved back. Then I thought he was giving Quint a peace sign, until the older man very subtly shook his head and held up his index finger in return. Even from this distance, I could see Theo’s eyes roll. Facing the crowd again, he said, “Okay, I have time for just *one* more. Any requests?”

Someone suggested ‘You Ain’t Nothing But a Hound Dog,’ which I knew was one of Jagger’s favorites. I never got tired of watching them perform it.

“The moment he’s done, he’s going to ask me if we can invite you for dinner tonight,” said Quint, around the second chorus. “Would you like to come over?”

“Um.” Though I wanted to, I wasn’t going to be very good company. On the other hand, it would give me the perfect excuse not to Skype with Zain, who would suspect something as soon as he laid eyes on me, and wouldn’t accept ‘fine’ as an answer. “I have to check my plans.”

“Of course,” Quint said.

I took out my phone and typed, *Went to the park and Theo and Quint were there. They invited me for dinner tonight. Talk to you tomorrow?*

To my horror, he called rather than texting back.

He’d *definitely* know something was up if I ignored it. Standing, I took a couple of steps away from Quint before I answered.

“Hi, Z.”

“Hey, babe. It’s fine for you to go over there, I just wanted to hear your voice first,” he replied, and I knew he wasn’t only being sweet. He would pick up on anything that sounded the slightest bit not-normal. “How was the appointment?”

Theo was collecting the money from his guitar case and Jagger’s dish. In a few minutes, I would be going to dinner with him and Quint. I tried very hard to concentrate on that, rather than the appointment, as I answered. “I told you, everything’s set.”

“Did they take your A1C and all that?”

I grimaced. Jagger had run over to me, and Theo wasn’t far behind. I didn’t want him overhearing medical jargon. “Can we talk about this tomorrow, please?”

“Ah, you haven’t told Theo and Quint about the diabetes yet, huh?”

“Zain,” I admonished, because that was the reaction he’d expect. He *knew* I hadn’t told them. He was teasing me.

“Relax, babe, they can’t hear me,” he said, cheerfully. “Okay, we’ll talk about it tomorrow. I’m going to call you right after SMT.”

It worked. I couldn’t believe it. Now I just had to hang up as quickly as possible.

“Kay,” I said, as Theo walked up.

“Love you! Have fun at dinner.”

“*Je t’aime*.” Those words, at least, were easy to get past my lips.

“What was that last thing?” Theo asked, watching me put the phone in my pocket.

I was confused. “Sorry?”

“The last thing you said.”

From behind me, Quint answered, “He said ‘*je t’aime*.’ It’s French for ‘I love you,’ and stop being nosy.”

Theo grinned. “Wow, ‘I love you and stop being nosy’ from two syllables? French is very economical,” he said. Then he looked from me to Quint and back. “Wait, since when do *either* of you speak French?”

“Um, my mother was raised in Ireland and France. She spoke only French at home until I was five, so I learned it alongside English,” I said. “I’m fluent in both.”

“While I’m *far* from fluent,” said Quint, “my childhood nanny was French, and I studied it in school.”

“Of *course* you had a French nanny, you preppy,” Theo said, rolling his eyes.

Quint ignored that. “Seb, will you be joining us?”

His expression was kind, patient, and utterly without pressure. By contrast, Theo was now looking eagerly at me. “He invited you over?” he asked. “Tonight? And I didn’t even have to beg and promise to behave?”

“You *will* still behave,” Quint said. He sounded more amused than stern, like Zain does, and I felt a spike of guilt. Tears prickled in the corners of my eyes. “Seb?” Quint asked. “Are you alright?”

I just couldn’t.

“Sorry,” I said. “I have to go. Another time?”

Theo’s face fell, but he said, “Sure. I’ll call you, okay? Or you can call me, when you’re free sometime.”

“Yeah,” I said, and walked away before Quint could ask any more concerned questions.

Art, my refuge, offered no comfort. The pencil produced only twisted, ugly lines, reflections of my tangled feelings. I tried coloring my second mandala of the day instead, but my mind refused to settle into it. My glucose was over 300 again by the time I gave up and went to bed early.

I wore earplugs and used a white-noise app on my phone to drown out my roommates. They couldn’t be blamed for my fitful sleep. I wanted to crawl out of my own skin, or hide somewhere dark and quiet until Zain came to find me, yet the idea was terrifying. And it wasn’t a fear of getting the spanking I deserved. I didn’t know what it was.

At dawn, I did a test (still too high), tossed my meter, a sketchbook, and a water bottle into my bag with the rest of my supplies, and went outside.

New York City may never sleep, but it does rest sometimes. My feet carried me through the calm streets to the park once more. I stopped at the gate and read over the large sign listing all the rules. Then I went in, found a suitable tree, and started to climb.

*

“Now, look, kid, you can come down on your own, or I can call the fire department to come *get* you down. That’ll mean a lot more trouble for you and a lot more paperwork for me. I hate paperwork. It’s a big hassle. Do you want to make a big hassle over this?”

No, I want you to go away and leave me alone, I thought, but I said nothing.

The cop moved a step closer, and I grabbed the branch above me, ready to pull myself onto it.

“Okay, okay!” he said, stopping and holding his hands up. “Don’t climb, kid.”

Someone in the group of onlookers called out to him, “Do you think he’s planning to jump?”

“He’d have to go a lot higher than that if he wanted to kill himself,” said someone else. “Maybe it’s a dare. Yo, dude, is it a dare?”

I hugged my bag to my chest with the hand I wasn’t using to hold onto the tree. *Why can’t you all just disappear?* I could feel them staring at me, trapping me. Far from disappearing, the crowd was growing. *Why couldn’t I disappear?* I closed my eyes and felt the vibrations of the city through the wood at my back, and I wished I could melt into it.

“Now, c’mon, kid— Sir, stay back! Please!” said the cop. I didn’t look to see who he was talking to. “This young man may be disturbed.”

“Officer, I know him,” said Quint’s voice. My eyes snapped open in shock. He was standing next to the cop, a few feet away from the rest of the audience, and he spoke quietly as he went on, “I believe I can get him down safely.”

“You know him?” asked the cop. “What’s his name?”

“It’s Seb,” Quint said. “He’s a friend of my husband’s.”

The cop shrugged. “Not like I have any way of checking that. He hasn’t said a word to me. Okay, if you think you can convince him to come down, have a crack at it.”

“Thank you, Officer. Could you ask these people to disperse? It would help.”

Turning to the crowd, the cop raised his voice and said, “Okay, people, let’s give the kid some room. Move along!”

Most of them left, and the few that remained took a couple of steps back. Quint, meanwhile, had walked over to stand on the grass almost directly below me.

“Good morning, Seb,” he said, as calmly as if we’d just bumped into each other. “Would you like to come down?”

Slowly, I shook my head.

He gave me an equanimous nod. “Alright. Your other option is for the officer over there to call the fire department. I don’t know you as well as Theo does, but I’m fairly certain you wouldn’t want that much attention.”

I gulped, blinked away tears, gulped again, and then, finally, spoke. “It didn’t say no climbing the trees.”

Quint frowned slightly. “What didn’t?”

“The sign with the rules,” I said, pointing towards the nearest gate. “I read it. It didn’t say you’re not allowed to climb the trees.”

It was a pathetic excuse, and yet I felt my chin get the stubborn set to it that usually makes Zain laugh and say, ‘Really, brat?’

For a brief moment, Quint looked surprised. Then he raised one eyebrow, and my stomach flipped over.

“I believe you are intelligent enough to realize that isn’t a comprehensive list,” he said, still even-tempered. “Now, I would like for you to come down, Sebastian.”

“It’s Sébastien,” I corrected, but I was already moving.

“My apologies. Sébastien,” he said as I dropped down onto the grass in front of him. His pronunciation wasn’t bad at all.

The remaining onlookers cheered when they saw me on the ground. I blushed and tried to step behind Quint.

“It’s alright,” he said. “Sit down on the bench there, please.”

I got the feeling that even with the ‘please’ tacked on, it wasn’t a request. With him following me over, I took a seat on the bench he’d indicated, a few feet away at the edge of the lawn.

And then he asked, “How’s your blood sugar right now?”

Freezing, I stared up at him.

He gestured to the medical alert bracelet on my wrist. "That's for type one diabetes, isn't it?"

I nodded. *How did he find out?!*

"Do you have your meter with you?"

"I— I don't need to test to know what it is right now," I said. "I've been running high since yesterday."

He looked like he was going to say something else, but the cop walked up behind him and interrupted. "Great job, sir."

"Thank you, Officer. Can I have a quick word with you alone?"

The two of them walked out of my earshot and spoke in hushed voices.

Was Quint telling him I was an irrational diabetic and therefore shouldn't be held responsible for my actions? Would I have to do a test and show them the result to prove it?

I would've left, except Quint was still facing me, and I saw his gaze flick towards me every few seconds. Instead, I pulled my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them as they came back over.

"Look, kid," said the cop, "I'm going to let you go with a warning today, because like I said, I hate paperwork. But just remember, climbing trees in New York City parks is considered disorderly behavior, which is a misdemeanor punishable by up to ninety days imprisonment and up to a thousand dollars in fines. Damaging a tree in a city park is even worse. That could get you up to a year and *fifteen* thousand dollars. Got it?"

"I would *never* damage a tree."

"Just stay off them from now on, okay?" he asked.

Nodding, I said, "I will."

"Good." To Quint, he said, "Thanks again," and then he left us alone.

Quint sat down next to me. I couldn't look at him at all, not even when he asked, "How are you feeling?" with obvious concern.

"I'm fine," I said. "Did... did you tell him about... this?" I fiddled with the bracelet.

"No," he said. "I'm a doctor. That would violate my ethics. And even if I weren't, it would be rude. I told him you were having a rough morning, and that you didn't mean any harm."

I let out a breath and glanced at him from the corner of my eye. "How did *you* know about it?"

"When you came to dinner, you brought your bag into the bathroom before you ate, and you were avoiding carbs, but that only made me suspect." He looked down a moment, and then said, "I confess, I saw a tube of glucose tablets in your bag when you took your phone out yesterday. I didn't mean to snoop, Seb. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I said, and I actually meant it, too. "Thank you for..." Trailing off, I put my feet on the ground and stood. "I should go."

"I was cutting through the park to buy coffee for breakfast," Quint said, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "I know Theo would love for you to join us. So would Jagger."

I bit my lip and adjusted the strap of my bag on my shoulder. After a few seconds, when I didn't say anything, he tilted his head down to make eye contact and smiled, kindly.

Swallowing, I said, "*D'accord.*"

It was a short walk. Neither of us spoke on the way, other than Quint directing me where to turn, but the silence was far from uncomfortable. It gave me time to collect myself somewhat.

He held the door of the coffee shop open for me, and I saw a crowd of people inside.

"I can wait here," I said.

Quint glanced from me to the shop before saying, "Would you like anything? A bottle of water?"

"No, I'm fine."

I couldn't interpret the look he gave me. After a moment, he said, "Okay, I'll be right back. Stay by the window where I can see you, please."

I nodded, and he went inside, leaving me alone.

It was more clear than ever that he was a Top. I had no doubt. The question was, did he know *I* was a Brat, or was he just acting the way he would with anyone in this situation? I blushed hotly

at the idea that I was so transparent. Then again, climbing a tree and refusing to come down was a rather obvious sign of a Brat in crisis mode. If Zain found out about that, he'd... it didn't bear thinking of.

I had hours still to calm myself before he'd be calling me. Everything would be fine.

Quint came back out in a few minutes, holding a paper bag with 'House Blend' stamped on it. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah."

He took a route that avoided the park entirely on the way to his and Theo's apartment. Intentional or not, I was grateful to evade the possibility of being recognized by someone who had seen me earlier.

Jagger greeted us at the door with his tail wagging like mad. I reached down to pet him and thought, *Maybe if I just spend the entire time until Zain calls doing this, I'll be back to normal.*

Theo was laying on the couch watching TV. "Jeez, that was the longest coffee run ever," he said, without taking his gaze off the screen.

"Uh, that was my fault," I said. "Sorry."

"Seb!" He jumped to his feet and came over, beaming. "Don't be sorry! I'm so happy to see you!"

He was wearing blue flannel pajama pants and a worn t-shirt that had a large treble clef and the words 'Here Comes Treble' printed on it. It looked like something Zain would buy.

"We ran into each other and I invited him for breakfast," Quint said from behind me.

"Breakfast?" said Theo. "Hell, stay for lunch, too! I am so overdue for some company. You have no idea. I've been cooped up here for almost a week, other than when you saw us last night."

"I hope you're feeling better," I said while I took off my sandals, and he gave me a confused look.

"From when you were sick on Monday, angel," said Quint.

At that, Theo's ears turned pink. "Oh. Right," he said. "Yeah, I'm better now, thanks."

I felt my own face flush, too, as I realized Quint had told me a white lie and I'd just stumbled on something Theo probably didn't want me knowing. Apologizing would only make it worse.

Quint rescued us both by saying, "Seb, would you like a cup of coffee or anything else?"

"No, thank you," I said. "I'm fine." I'd finished off my water bottle in the tree, when my blood sugar peaked, and at the moment I was much more interested in using a bathroom than drinking.

"Alright, then why don't two watch TV while I make waffles?" Quint suggested.

"He makes *the best* waffles," said Theo, who was smiling again now, "but only once in a blue moon, so you picked a good day to join us. Do you like the show House? There's a marathon on."

"I've never seen it," I said.

"Never—! Okay, we're watching House. C'mon."

I followed him to the couch, and when I sat down, Jagger jumped up next to me and put his head in my lap. Scratching behind his ears provided a great distraction. I felt bad for moving him so I could slip into the bathroom on the first commercial break.

My test came back at 230 mg/dl, which was an improvement over what it had been, but still high. There wasn't much I could do about it, other than give myself some extra insulin with my pre-meal dose and hope my mood wouldn't drive it up again, or else Zain would know, and would ask all kinds of questions I couldn't adequately answer, and then he'd figure the rest of it out, too, and then—

Relax!

I sat on the edge of the tub with my eyes closed until I had my breathing under control. When I finally emerged into the living room, Quint looked over from the sink and said, "Seb, could you come here a minute, please?"

The show had come back on. Theo wasn't paying any attention to us. I walked to the counter, and Quint handed me a cookbook.

"My waffle recipe," he said, quietly. "It lists the nutrition facts at the end, including carbs."

"Thanks," I said. The carb count listed was about what I would've expected. Still, I appreciated the gesture.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

I gave the book back to him, saying, “I’m fine,” and he got an inscrutable expression once more.

From the couch, Theo called, “Seb, you’re missing the best part!”

“Sorry,” I replied, and took the excuse to rejoin him. That look of Quint’s made me nervous, for some reason.

Theo and Quint both tried asking me about my classes while we ate. My answers were short to the point of being rude, but I couldn’t help myself. I was barely managing the appearance of normality. If I elaborated the slightest bit, my cracks would show.

The waffles were as good as promised, even without syrup, yet I only finished three-quarters of one and a few mouthfuls of scrambled eggs before my appetite was gone. I picked at the rest until Quint said, “Would you like me to put that in something for you to have later?”

I went pink. “It’s delicious, I’m just not very hungry,” I tried to explain.

“I understand,” he said. “Here.” He collected my plate along with his and Theo’s empty ones and took them into the kitchen, with Jagger at his heels. Theo grabbed the cups and silverware and followed, and I twisted around in my chair to watch Quint transfer the rest of my food into a tupperware container.

As he went to put it in the fridge, I said, “You can leave it out. I have to get going.”

Theo stopped loading dishes into the dishwasher. “Aw, can’t you stay?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Homework.”

The alternative was explaining that I needed to take a nap and try to meditate before Zain called.

Like he could read my mind, Quint asked, “Will you be speaking with your fiancé today?”

Theo’s mouth dropped open, and he stared at his husband in indignation. “*What?! Why is it I’m not allowed to ask those kinds of questions, but you are?*”

I frowned. “What kinds of questions?”

He barely glanced at me as he answered, “Questions about your Top. Uh! I mean....” He looked from my reddening face to Quint’s raised eyebrow and back, and then blew out a breath. “Well, you *are* a Brat, aren’t you? He, like, spansks you and stuff?”

“Theodore!”

Shrugging defensively, he said, “I didn’t *mean* to let the cat out of the bag, but now that it *is*, what’s the point in hiding anything?”

“You could still have been much more tactful in your phrasing,” Quint told him, crossing his arms. “How would you feel if someone asked you that?”

Theo’s gaze dropped to the counter, and then he looked at me from under his eyelashes. “Sorry, Seb. I didn’t mean to embarrass you or just blurt it out like that. My mouth gets ahead of my brain sometimes.”

“It’s okay,” I said, though I was still blushing hard. “Um, you’re right, I am a— a Brat, and Zain’s my Top.” It felt weird to say that out loud to someone.

He beamed. “I knew it! I’ve never met another Brat in real life. This is awesome! We have so much to talk about.”

“Before you get into any of it, I would like an answer to my original question,” Quint said. He uncrossed his arms and leaned against the peninsula, looking at me. “Will you be speaking with Zain today, Seb?”

I nodded. “He’s going to Skype me later, when his liberty starts at noon.”

“Can you stay here until he does? I’ll walk you back to your dorm to get anything you need for your homework, and you could use the computer in the office for your call, so you would have privacy.”

“...Why?” I asked, apprehensively.

His face became unbearably kind. “Because every time I ask you if you need anything or how you’re feeling, you say ‘I’m fine.’”

My stomach dropped.

“Oh, don’t *ever* say that,” Theo told me, with a wry smile. “Don’t you know ‘fine’ is an acronym? It’s defined in the handbook given to all Tops as ‘freaked out, insecure, nervous, and emotional.’”

If Zain had gotten a Top handbook, he'd promptly thrown it out a window, but he would agree with that definition. I pressed my lips together and shifted in my seat.

"I'd feel more comfortable if I could keep an eye on you until Zain's call," Quint said.

"You don't have to worry," I said, with guilt twisting in my gut and making it hard to speak. "I'm not going to climb a tree again, and my blood sugar's already going down."

"Whoa, wait, you climbed a tree?" Theo asked.

Merde. I'd been so focused on getting Quint to stop looking at me like that, I'd forgotten Theo didn't know.

Well, like he had said, the cat was out of the bag now. "Yeah," I admitted, quietly. "That's where I was when Quint found me in the park."

He still looked confused. "Because... of your blood sugar?"

"No," I said, and then shook my head. "I mean, yes, it was high, but that's not why I climbed it. Or... it was, but not like that."

I wasn't explaining this very well. Zain would know exactly what I meant. Theo was just frowning harder. I had to start with the most basic fact about me. It would change the way he saw me forever, but there was no choice.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "I have type one diabetes."

His expression morphed into surprise, and then sympathy. "I'm sorry. That sucks," he said. I never know how to respond to those kinds of statements, so I was glad when he immediately turned to Quint and asked, "You knew this? For how long?"

"I figured it out yesterday, and Seb confirmed it to me this morning," the older man replied. "I couldn't tell you, angel."

"Yeah, I get it." To me, he added, "I see now why he wants you to stay."

I stiffened. "I can take care of myself."

"Yes," said Quint, "and accepting support from others is sometimes a part of taking care of yourself."

Zain has been trying to get that idea into my head practically since we met. Suddenly, I was on the verge of crying again.

"I'm offering to support you as a friend, Seb," Quint continued. "Not a Top. You aren't my Brat, so if you'd rather go, you're absolutely free to."

"Quint!" Theo protested.

"I'm not going to force him to stay, angel."

"I can't," I said, concentrating hard to keep my breathing under control. "I have to go. Now."

Quint seemed disappointed, but he said, "We'll walk you downstairs. Will you let me put my number in your contacts list, at least?"

I remembered Zain doing the same thing with Platt over Parents' Weekend, and how he'd said it was for his peace of mind. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I stood and slid it across the counter.

Theo still looked like he wanted to argue about me leaving. "You've already got mine," he said, while Quint was tapping on the screen. "We're both here for you, okay?"

I nodded.

"There." Quint handed the phone back to me. "Do you need anything else before you go?"

"No, I'm fi—"

He arched an eyebrow, and I broke off, gulping. What else could I say? I had two full languages at my disposal, but anything even approaching a synonym would be lying, and he'd know it. I wasn't fine at all.

Admitting it to myself was like opening a valve. Words and tears started pouring out of me before I could stop them.

"My new endo wants me to take remedial diabetes education classes and get an insulin pump because I've been stressed out and high a lot and now my A1C is out of control and I haven't told Zain yet about that or the classes, but it doesn't matter, because I'm not going, anyway."

Mortified, I pressed the back of my wrist to my mouth and bit down hard to muffle myself. I couldn't look at either of them. *Leave now!* I thought, yet I couldn't move, either, so I simply stood there, staring at the floor and trying not to sob.

Quint was beside me. “Okay, you’re alright,” he said. “Let’s sit down on the couch.” He took the arm I was biting in a firm grip, pulled it away from my teeth, and kept hold of it as he guided me around the dining table. “Angel, would you please get him a glass of ice water?”

“Yeah, of course,” said Theo, sounding alarmed.

“Here, Seb, have a seat.”

I collapsed, pulled my knees up to my chest, crossed my arms on top of them, and hid my face. I felt the cushions move as Quint sat, too, and then his palm against the back of my neck. On my other side, Jagger jumped up and sniffed at my ear.

Quint didn’t yank me over into a hug like Zain would have done, but he kept his hand there, rubbing my skin. A minute later, I heard Theo walk over and the clink of him putting the glass down on the coffee table.

“Drink this,” Quint said.

What would he do if I refused? He said he’s acting as a friend, not a Top, so surely he wouldn’t make me?

I felt ashamed of myself as soon as I thought it. He was probably trying very hard not to give into his Top instincts without mine or Zain’s permission. What kind of friend was I if I took advantage of that?

My hand was shaking so much as I reached out for the glass that I jostled it and spilled some on the carpet. “S—sorry.”

“It’s alright, it’s only water.” He helped me steady it and take a few gulps while Jagger whined and crawled into my lap. I had to uncurl myself to make room for him.

Theo sat in the armchair, watching with wide eyes. “Do you need anything else?” he asked.

A hysterical laugh spurted out of me. “Yeah, know any good hiding places?”

He snorted. “Well, I usually go to my friend Zeggy’s when I want to hide, but that’s the first place he checks, so.”

Zain wouldn’t know how to find me there, I thought. The idea was both appealing and frightening.

In my lap, Jagger rolled over and looked up at me beseechingly until I started petting his belly with my free hand. Quint was still stroking my neck and shoulders, using slow, deep pressure.

He took the glass from me and set it on the table again, and then asked, “The endocrinologist appointment was yesterday?”

I hung my head and nodded. “Right before I saw you two in the park. It was supposed to be just to get a form signed. I didn’t... didn’t expect the rest of it.”

“Does Zain still think it was just getting a form signed?”

I blinked, and tears fell into Jagger’s fur. “He doesn’t need more things to worry about,” I said, thickly. “I’ll be okay once I adjust.”

“Yeah, except that whole keeping-it-a-secret thing never really works, does it?” Theo put in. I looked at him without lifting my head, and he gave me a closed-lip smile. “If he’s any kind of decent Top, he’ll notice something’s wrong. You should really tell him now — and, yeah, I *know* I should follow this advice myself more often,” he added, rolling his eyes at Quint over my shoulder. Focusing back on me, he continued, “You’ll break down and tell him eventually, right? Or something else will happen that’ll tell him. It always does.”

“Something like being admitted to a hospital with DKA,” Quint said, quietly.

From Theo’s expression, he didn’t know what that meant. “Diabetic ketoacidosis,” I told him, speaking by rote. “It’s what happens when your blood sugar is too high for too long. Your body breaks down fat to use as energy instead of glucose, which releases acids called ketones that build up and become toxic.” To Quint, I said, “I test for ketones whenever I’m over 300. They haven’t been high.”

“You mentioned earlier that your levels have increased because of stress,” he said. “Would keeping this from Zain make you more stressed?”

I gulped and didn’t answer.

After a few moments, he went on, “I don’t know Zain. But if it were Theo in this situation, I’d be very glad he told me.”

“What’s he going to do, anyway?” Theo asked, with another eyeroll. “Spank you from West Point?”

“Annapolis, not West Point,” I said. I wished he *was* at West Point. It was much closer. Most of my attention, though, was on Quint’s question. Yes, hiding this would make me more stressed, and if I went into DKA because that... I couldn’t imagine a worse thing to inflict on Zain. “You’re right. I have to tell him.”

“Would you like to stay here until you do?” Quint asked.

I looked from him to Theo, who was smiling again. They'd both seen me in near-full meltdown now, and neither one of them showed any signs of pity. Deciding to tell Zain removed the need to seem relaxed when he called, which, ironically, made me feel a lot calmer, but I was still scared about what he'd do. And I felt safe with them.

"Yeah, I'd like that."

"Good," said Quint. "Now, I'm going to finish cleaning up the kitchen." He squeezed my shoulder one last time before getting up.

Theo grinned and moved over to take his place the couch. "Is yours a neat freak too?"

"Well, he *is* in the military, so it's kind of ingrained in him," I said. "He doesn't really mind if I make a mess, though."

"Lucky." He picked up the remote and put his feet up on the coffee table. "Want to watch more House?"

"Okay," I said, and he turned on the TV.

Zain was carrying me. My eyes were shut, but I knew I was hanging limply in his strong arms. I was wearing nothing except a thin robe that opened in the back, and I was freezing.

My eyelids fluttered apart, and I saw a hospital hallway with harsh florescent lights bouncing off the white walls and linoleum. There were closed steel doors on either side. It stretched on and on, into dark shadows in the distance that didn't get any closer as Zain walked. My pulse was suddenly racing. I turned to cling to him for safety and warmth, and that's when I saw his chest.

Where his tattoo should have been — the heart with *semper fidelis* written into it, as much a part of it as the muscle itself — there was only a massive, gnarled scar. I gasped and looked up to ask him what had happened. "Zain?"

He gazed straight ahead and went on walking, like he hadn't heard me.

"Z?"

Still, nothing. No expression at all on his face. And then I realized he wasn't cradling me the way he normally does when he carries me. There was no love in his hold. I might have been a dummy, or one of the sandbags they use for training exercises.

“ZAIN!”

Finally, he made eye contact, but his brown irises, instead of dancing with humor, were full of sorrow and pain. I knew suddenly that every single step was causing him the greatest agony imaginable, and yet he kept going.

“Stop!” I cried, and sat up in Theo and Quint’s sun-drenched living room.

Theo stared at me from the other end of the couch. “Whoa! It’s okay, it was just a dream,” he said, moving over and grabbing onto my arm. “You fell asleep. If I’d known you were having a nightmare, I would’ve woken you up.”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Huh?” he said, and I realized I’d spoken in French.

Carefully searching for the right words, I repeated myself in English.

“Oh, it’s almost a quarter to noon,” he said. “I was actually just about to wake you anyway. Quint took Jagger on his walk, but he’ll be back in a minute to get you set up on the computer.” His ears turned pink as he admitted, “I’m kinda not allowed to use it right now. Look, are you okay? Need a drink of water?”

“No,” I said. “I just want to see Zain.”

“Well, it won’t be long,” he said, with an encouraging smile.

I didn’t tell him I’d meant in person.

Chapter Ten

I couldn't shake the suspicion that something was wrong. As soon as I got back to my room, I pulled up the Greyhound website and did a search for a round-trip New York to Annapolis ticket, departing the following afternoon.

Sold out, the page informed me.

"*Shit*," I said. I shouldn't have waited so long. Self-recrimination wouldn't help, though. "Okay, trains." There weren't any stations in Annapolis, but there were two in Baltimore, and I could meet him there if I found someone to give me a ride.

I pulled up another search, and winced at the prices and times. It would probably be faster and cheaper for him to rent a car and drive down, even with the cost of gas and the surcharge for being under 25 years old. After checking a few different rental agencies and doing some quick calculations, I decided that was the best option, and felt a bit better for having a plan.

I sent him a text before I went to bed, and another one when I woke up. He hadn't responded to either by the time I got back from SMT. Another major warning sign. I didn't even bother taking a shower before calling him.

When Skype connected, he looked worse than I had feared. There's a certain pale, drawn air he gets that tells me the second I pull him into a hug, he's going to start crying. Only now I couldn't. Guilt hit me so hard, it took me a moment to realize the bed behind him wasn't his own.

"*Habibi*, what's wrong? Where are you?"

Quietly, he said, "I'm at Theo and Quint's apartment."

I frowned. "Did you stay over last night?"

He looked down at his lap and said, "No, I—I didn't have dinner with them at all last night," and I stared at him, shocked.

"You lied to me, *habibi*?" Hiding things and stretching the truth, sure, but I couldn't remember him ever telling me an outright lie.

"No!" he said, wiping away a tear from his cheek. "I *thought* I was going when I asked you, and then, after you called, I changed my mind, and I couldn't... couldn't tell you."

"Okay, it's alright, I understand," I reassured him, hating the way his voice was breaking. "Just try to explain what happened."

He hugged one knee to his chest, and then hid his mouth behind his forearm and looked at me with watery eyes. A lump grew in my throat. Not being able to touch him was killing me. I had to keep a steady, calm demeanor, though, or I'd only make it worse.

"Was it the quiz?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"The appointment?"

This time, he dropped his eyes down for a second but didn't move.

I gave him the best smile I could muster. "Much as I love a good game of Twenty Questions, babe, this'll go a lot quicker if you talk. What happened during the appointment?"

Slowly, and with great difficulty, he lifted his head and spoke. "The doctor thinks I need to take remedial classes to learn how to manage my levels."

My eyebrows twitched upward. "Okay, that's ridiculous," I said. "You *know* how to manage your levels."

More tears ran down over his freckles as he jerked his head from side to side.

"No, what?"

"I don't," he said, on half a sob. "My A1C was 9.2."

I moved closer to the computer screen. "Yes, you *do*. You're going through a rough patch right now, but that doesn't mean you've suddenly forgotten everything, it just means your treatment plan needs adjusting. Did they go over any options for that?"

He gulped and said, "The pump."

I swore internally. Seb's always been terrified of switching to an insulin pump. The idea of having something attached to him, with tubing to get caught up and tangled around things, a constant sign of his disease to both himself and the entire world — it freaks him out like almost nothing else. Dr. Johnson, his endo in Hawaii, had seen how good his control was with injections and said she saw no reason to switch if Seb didn't want to. I wished he could've brought her to New York with him.

"Okay," I said, exhaling, "tell me exactly what happened in this appointment, from the beginning."

He did, stumbling and tearful. By the time he finished, I was struggling not to let the full depth of my annoyance show. How *dare* this doctor tell my Brat he didn't know how to treat his illness, without so much as *trying* to learn something about him or to take his feelings into consideration? Couldn't he see his arrogance had caused Seb unnecessary stress, which could only be damaging to his health? *Seb* didn't need remedial classes, *he* did, on proper bedside manner.

Part of my annoyance was directed at myself, too. How had I missed this last night? Why hadn't I asked more questions? Evasion is Seb's first strategy of defense. He trusts me to see through that, and instead, I had let him get away with it and get himself even more worked up. *Well, that's not going to happen again*, I thought, as I made a few adjustments to my plan. He was in no shape to make a long drive. Step one, though, was calming him down some, and reassuring him that this wasn't the end of the world.

"You're not going back there," I said. "We'll find a better endo for you." His look of relief was quickly replaced by nervousness when I tilted my head a little and went on, "So, after that, you left and texted me 'everything's taken care of'?"

Flushing, he said, "I meant with the accommodations."

I snorted in amusement. "Yeah, sure you did, brat. Okay, what happened then?"

He took a deep breath, and his voice came out a lot steadier as he explained, "I dropped the form off, like I said, and walked to the park, and Quint and Theo asked me over, but after you called, I didn't feel like going anymore, so I went back to my room for the night." There was a pause. The webcams made eye contact impossible, and yet he gave the impression of avoiding it. "Then this morning," he said, "I was in the park again, and Quint found me and invited me for breakfast."

I smiled. "Uh-huh."

Shifting in his seat, he quickly continued, "Theo brought everything in the open about us both being in discipline relationships. He kind of just blurted it out, not meaning to. And then they convinced me to tell you about the appointment, and Quint wanted me to stay until I talked to you, so. That's why I'm here."

Oh, nice try, I thought, *but you ought to know by now that I'm not easily distracted*. Aloud, I said, "I'm glad. Could I meet Quint?"

He blinked. "What, now?"

"Yep."

“...Why?”

I shrugged. “Well, one, I want to introduce myself and say thanks, and two, I figured maybe it’d be easier if *he* told me whatever it is you’re hiding right now.”

His face went absolutely scarlet, yet without so much as scrunching his nose at me, he got up and walked out of view. A second later, I heard him say, “Quint? Could you come in here?”

I was amazed. I thought for sure he’d spill the beans rather than involve someone else. Just who was this guy?

My first impression was of tallness — it was hard to judge with the angle of the webcam, but he was definitely taller than Seb, who’s my height. Then he moved another chair in front of the desk, sat down, and nodded to me politely.

“Hello,” he said. “You must be Zain.”

“Z, this is Quint,” said Seb as he reclaimed his seat, looking nervous again.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“You as well,” said Quint. “I do hope neither of you feel I overstepped my bounds this morning. I know I would be upset if a Top I hadn’t even met acted that way towards Theo. I was trying to help, though.”

“Acted what way?” I asked, and he turned to Seb, who was nearly in a full fetal position.

“I thought you had told him?” he questioned, very gently.

Seb shook his head and shot me a pleading look.

“*Would* it be easier if Quint told me?”

He glanced at the older man, and then nodded.

I was surprised again. “Okay,” I said. “It was something that happened this morning, right?”

Another, smaller nod.

“If he tried to explain right now, it’d probably come out in French, anyway,” I told Quint, “and as he likes to remind me, my French is awful.”

With a moment's hesitation, the older man said, "While walking through the park on my way to a coffee shop, I saw a crowd of people and a police officer looking up into a tree."

I was laughing before I could stop myself. "Oh, of *course* you were up a tree, babe. I should've guessed."

He glared at me. "*Zain!*"

Ignoring him, I spoke to Quint, who seemed taken aback. "I assume the cop was trying to get him down?"

He looked from my amused face to Seb's scowl. "Uh, yes, unsuccessfully. After I recognized Seb, I intervened, because I felt I might be able to assist."

"And that's when you had to get Topy," I surmised. I knew exactly the state of mind Seb would've been in at that point. There was no way he'd come down willingly without believing there was someone on the ground he could feel safer with than in the tree. I felt another pang of guilt — mixed with a tiny bit of jealousy — that I hadn't been the one.

"Just a small amount," Quint said. To Seb, who was blushing harder than ever, he added in a reassuring tone, "You were really quite cooperative."

Yeah, because he didn't want you looking too closely at him, I thought. Quint couldn't have been expected to see through that act — Seb's own family doesn't — but him being fooled by it smothered the green-eyed monster. No one knows my Brat better than me, not even another Top. "I'm glad you were there for him," I said, truthfully. "He'd probably still be in the tree if you hadn't come along."

"No, I wouldn't," Seb muttered. "The cop said he'd call the fire department to come get me."

Grinning, I said, "Well, that would've been exciting. Did you get charged with anything, babe?"

He rolled his eyes. "No, he just gave me a warning and made me promise not to climb any more trees. He actually thought I was going to *damage* them." He sounded offended by the very idea.

I laughed again. "Didn't have your Certified Hippie card to show him?"

"*Zain.*"

"Only you, babe," I teased. "Okay, so the endo and your A1C freaked you out, you hid it, climbed a tree, and defied New York's Finest, but Quint here was able to get you down. That about cover everything?"

He ducked his head and nodded. Next to him, Quint was standing up, saying, "I'll leave you two in private again."

As soon as he was gone, Seb bit his lip and fidgeted with his alert bracelet. "So... what now?"

This was the tricky bit. He was still much too tense and upset, and I needed time. The main thing was not to get him any more wound up.

"Now—"

"Yo, Mo," JJ said as he came through the door behind me. "Yo, Seb." He waved at the screen before pulling out a change of uniform and heading for the shower.

I waited until the water turned on, and then said, "Now, we need to decrease your stress level, starting right away. Why don't you stay there with Quint and Theo for a while longer?"

"I've already taken advantage of their hospitality long enough," he protested. "I was only supposed to stay until after I talked to you."

I was willing to bet they wouldn't mind keeping him company, but it wasn't worth arguing over. "Okay, then I want you to find a nice, quiet studio and work on something relaxing. Not anything for school, and not in your dorm if your roommates are home and making noise. I'm going to check in with phone calls at least twice an hour. Got it?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'll call in about twenty minutes. That should give you enough time to get set up."

His eyes glistened as he said, "*D'accord.*"

I gave him an encouraging smile. "I love you, *habibi.*"

"*Je t'aime.* Bye."

"*Au revoir,*" I replied, thinking, *It won't be long.*

After he hung up, I shouted, "J, quit dawdling in there," already moving to get a set of summer whites out of my closet. The water turned off, and he came out wrapped in a towel.

"All yours."

“Thanks.” I ducked around him and started the quickest shower of my life. Just ten minutes later, I was walking down Maryland Avenue outside Gate 3, dialing my phone. It rang twice before being picked up.

“Hey, Mohyeldin.”

“Hey, Klatsky,” I said. “You working today?”

“No, why?”

“I have a small favor to ask you.”

“You didn’t have another run-in with that squad leader of yours, did you?”

“Not recently.” I turned onto King George Street, glanced around for anyone else with a military look about them, and then started to explain what I needed.

Klatsky picked me up by St. John’s College. As I sat down in his passenger seat, he said, “You know you’re crazy?”

“Says the man enabling me.”

“Yeah, I’m crazy, too,” he agreed, shaking his head. “Okay, I need to go back to my place. You can take it from there. I’ve already got the GPS programmed for you.” Reaching behind him between the seats, he grabbed a leather jacket and dropped it in my lap. “Take your cover off and put that on. A lieutenant commander and a retired rear admiral live on my block, and if either of them see you in that ice cream suit driving my car, they’re going to start asking questions.”

I didn’t argue, despite the heat.

We pulled into his driveway a few minutes later. He parked the car but left it running. “I really appreciate this, Klatsky,” I said.

“Don’t mention it,” he replied. “To anyone. Just be back before midnight.”

“With a full tank of gas,” I promised. He got out, and I climbed over the center console into the driver’s seat. I waited for him to go into the house and shut the door before I reversed onto the street and turned towards the interstate. With one hand, I took my phone from my pocket and called Seb, switching it to speaker so I could leave it in my lap.

“Hi,” he answered. “I found an empty studio. I’m thinking I’m going to do a self-portrait.”

“That’s good, babe,” I said. “Oh, I just realized I should’ve asked you to tell Quint goodbye for me.”

“I did anyway,” he said, and then went on in a more exasperated tone, “I cannot *believe* you reacted that way in front of him.”

“I know, I know, why can’t I be like all the other Tops, right?” I asked, grinning. “Next time, I’ll lecture you about safety and respecting authority, I promise. No, wait, I should be telling you there’s not going to *be* a next time, shouldn’t I?”

He sighed. “You’re awful.”

Chuckling, I said, “Quint seemed like a very proper Top. What exactly *did* he do to get you down? I’m curious.”

“He... gave me a Look and called me ‘Sebastian,’” he admitted, and I laughed again.

“And what’d he do when you corrected him?”

“Apologized and said it the right way.”

That was a good sign. It showed a respect for Seb, and an understanding of him. Someone else might have thought the correction was a sign of defiance. “That was the only Topy thing he did?” I asked.

“No, he also kind of very gently called me out for saying ‘I’m fine,’ but that was later.”

“Okay, so what happened between— actually, wait, go back to when you were in the tree, and no glossing over the details this time.”

I drove northward, listening to him recount his morning while he simultaneously got his canvas, paints, and brushes set up. When he was through, I promised to call him back in half an hour. I would’ve stayed on the phone with him for the entire drive, if I hadn’t thought it would arouse his suspicions to overhear me going through tollbooths and stopping for gas. My visit needed to be a surprise to be most effective.

There was very little traffic until I got close to New York itself. I crossed the city limits in under three and a half hours. It took another twenty-five minutes to find a parking garage close to Cooper Union, making it just after 1630 when I climbed out of the car. The air this far north was

cooler, a proper fall day, but I left the jacket behind. Seb is morally opposed to leather. Donning my cover again, I walked out into the sunshine.

The garage was right behind the school's Foundation Building, where Seb was painting. Cater-cornered from that was his dorm, and across from both of them I found a small triangular plaza with rows of long, modern-looking wooden benches. I sat down on one and took out my phone again.

"Hey, babe," I said when he answered. "You about done there?"

"Yeah, I'm cleaning up. This needs to dry before I do the next part. Why?"

"I want to see you."

"Okay, I'll head back to the apartment," he said. "Just give me a few minutes to walk over."

"Kay," I said, smiling. I ended the call and waited, keeping my eyes on the street corner opposite. It didn't take long for his familiar, lean frame to appear. He stood facing the crosswalk towards his dorm, side-on to me, waiting for the light to change. I dialed him again and watched him pull out his phone and roll his eyes at it before he picked up.

"Zain, I'm on my way."

"I'm on your left," I replied.

"What do you mean, you're on my—?"

Breaking off, he slowly looked over his shoulder. I gave him a little wave. He gasped through the phone, his jaw dropping open, and then his lips pressed together hard, and, with barely a glance for oncoming cars, he was striding across the street towards me, his hand falling to his side. Standing, I held my arms out, and a second later he crashed into me with enough force to knock me back a step.

"Hey, *habibi*." I wrapped him up as close as I could get him and stroked his hair while he made small, choked noises against my shoulder. My eyes were moist. "I've got you. Everything'll be fine."

It took him a full minute to stop crying and lift his head up to frown at me. "How did you *get* here?"

"It's not exactly Fort Knox."

He glowered. "You know what I mean!"

Smiling, I said, "I borrowed Klatsky's car and drove, silly. What did you think?"

"But you're not supposed to be this far from Annapolis," he said. "You have to stay within the tri-city area."

"Well, traditionally, I'm supposed to stay within a radius of 22 nautical miles from the dome of the Naval Academy Chapel, which is 25.317 statute miles, but really, who can keep track of that?"

The scowl went up a few degrees. "Zain! You're going to get in trouble!"

"In the words of my good pal Aladdin: 'Trouble? Ha! No way! You're only in trouble if you get caught!'" I replied. "And yes, I know that Aladdin then immediately got caught, but I'm much sneakier than him. I don't have a monkey, for one thing." He huffed and opened his mouth like he was going to argue again, until I lowered my voice and leaned closer to speak directly into his ear. "Less worrying about me, babe. More worrying about your butt." That made his teeth snap together with a click. I gave him a cheerful look and pointed towards his dorm building across the street. "Your hairbrush is up there, right?"

He lowered his gaze and nodded. Stepping back, I took his hand in mine and led him to the crosswalk. There wasn't much time to spare.

We had to stop just inside the building for him to sign me in as a visitor. The student working at the reception desk did a double-take at my uniform and then went back to her textbook. As we got into the elevator, Seb muttered, "Did you have to wear that? It's so conspicuous."

"I'm not allowed to keep civvies, remember?"

The doors closed, and he pressed the button for the third floor, pointedly saying, "You're also not allowed to *be here*."

I swatted him. I wasn't messing around on the worrying front.

His face was still pink when we got to his apartment. "I don't think my roommates are home," he said, glancing around as I followed him in, "but they could return any minute, so—"

"Relax, I have a plan," I told him. "First, though, where's your bathroom? My last rest stop was in Delaware."

"The door on your right."

I ducked into it and nearly coughed. "This smells worse than Keegan's room when she was in her Bob Marley phase," I called out to him.

“I know,” he replied.

Trying not to breathe too much, I did my business and washed my hands before rejoining him in the tiny common-room-slash-kitchen. “You *hated* the way Keegan’s room smelled when she was in her Bob Marley phase.”

“My bedroom’s this one.”

Alright, one thing at a time, I suppose, I thought, bookmarking that for later.

His room was small and outfitted with the usual bland, college-dorm furniture, not that different from my own, but it had Seb’s mark in the messy piles of papers and sketchbooks on his desk, the plastic bin of medical supplies and snacks sticking half-out from under his bed, and the rows of colored mandalas taped to the wall above his headboard. I sat down on the duvet — the same one from our bedroom in Hawaii, which was much too big for his twin-sized mattress — and beamed at him.

“I like it. Hairbrush?”

He blinked, uneasy. Then, while still watching me carefully, he reached behind him, opened a desk drawer, and took out the brush. “We can’t do this here,” he said, not offering it to me.

“I know,” I said. “I told you, I have a plan. Put that in your bag and gimme your phone. I figured I’d call Quint and ask him if we can borrow their apartment for a little while.”

His eyes went wide. “ZAIN, NO.”

“Do you have a better idea, babe?” I asked. I was willing to take suggestions, but as far as I could see, it was the only place available. I watched him silently coming to the same conclusion, and then, reluctantly, he took his phone from his bag and held it out. I grabbed it in one hand and his wrist in the other, and tugged until he sat down next to me, where I could put my arm around his shoulders. “It’s okay, *habibi*, he’s not going to hold it against you.”

“It’s still embarrassing. I barely know him.”

“You knew him well enough to have him tell me about the tree. With anyone else, you would’ve thought *that* was embarrassing.”

“It *was*,” he said. “But not as embarrassing as I expected.”

“So I can ask him?”

He sighed, and then nodded. I kept hugging him while I programmed the other Top's number into my own phone and called him from it.

"Quint Hanniford?" he answered.

"It's Zain Mohyeldin. Seb's Top?"

"Oh, of course. Seb isn't here, I'm afraid."

"No, he's sitting beside me," I said. "I just drove up from Annapolis, and we need somewhere private to go. We were wondering if it wouldn't be too much trouble to use your apartment."

"It's no trouble at all," he replied, without any hesitation. "Theo's out with Jagger until this evening, and I was planning to do some grocery shopping. Seb knows the way. I'll tell the front desk I'm expecting visitors so they'll let you up."

"Thank you, we appreciate it. See you in a few." As I ended the call, Seb buried his face in his hands. I tousled his hair. "Babe, when did you last test?"

"Before lunch," he said, muffled. He'd taken a short break from the painting to eat around 1330, I remembered.

"Do another one now," I said. "I need to know where you're at."

"Probably high still," he replied, but he pulled out his kit. The result came back right on the borderline between the top of his target range and a high. "The walk's about ten minutes. I should have a snack."

I smiled. "See? Told you that you know how to manage yourself." A walk combined with a spanking would probably drop him too low for this time of day, and it was better to correct for it now than wait until later.

He rolled his eyes at me as he grabbed a packet of granola bars from his stash under the bed. Giving his phone back, I watched him check that he had everything in his bag. The hairbrush was the final item he dropped in, with a grimace.

When he was ready, I stood, took his hand again, and squeezed it twice. The corner of his lips twitched up as he squeezed back. Then he got to his feet, and we walked out the door together.

Chapter Eleven

New Yorkers, I had learned over the month of living among them, take absolutely no notice of other people on the street, as long as you stay out of their way. On the walk to Quint's, I discovered that wasn't true if you happened to be hand-in-hand with a man wearing a crisp, white military uniform, complete with a cover and rows of ribbons on his chest. Some people smiled at us as we went past. Most simply stared. At least no one stopped us to thank Zain for his service, as sometimes happens when he wears a uniform in public. I was glad for that.

I thought perhaps we'd attract less attention if we weren't holding hands, but when I'd tried to extract mine from his grip as we left my dorm building, he'd given me an amused glance that made all the muscles in my stomach and rear end tense up. So I walked beside him, trying to ignore the looks of passersby and to sort out the tumult of emotions within me.

Seeing him there, in person, had seemed like a dream at first — a counterpart to that awful nightmare — until I found myself inside his hug. He was solid and warm and *real*, dazzling in the sunlight. My relief overpowered everything else, and I clung to him without a thought for where we were or how he had gotten there.

I still felt that sense of relief, of being on steady ground again. I couldn't bring myself to wish he hadn't come, and yet when I realized what he was risking on my behalf, I wanted to march him back to his car and order him to leave. He'd cut off all my protests with smart remarks. And then, right on the street corner, in broad daylight, he'd casually told me to worry about my butt and asked me where my hairbrush was. Nothing could have been more effective at redirecting my attention, which was exactly what he wanted, I knew. Even now, three-quarters of my thoughts were on the brush in my bag and how he would be using it.

Rarely do I have this much time to anticipate a spanking. If Zain thinks I need one, I'm usually bare and upended over his knee within a few minutes, at the very longest. He sees it as a matter of efficiency: going from problem identified to problem solved with a minimum of steps. I'm often caught off-guard, and that helps, too. It gives me no chance to build a blockade around myself. That was probably a large part of the reason why he hadn't told me he was coming.

If he had, I might've been able to come up with a better place for us to go than back to Quint and Theo's apartment. At least Theo wasn't home, from what Zain had said as we rode the elevator down from my dorm. I wanted to keep the number of people who knew I was about to get spanked as low as possible.

Why had I agreed to this? Quint must think I was awful, having a meltdown so bad that my Top had to drive four hours to come straighten me out, and intrude on the life of a near-stranger, too.

"Is this it?" Zain asked, breaking into my thoughts.

I saw the building in front of us and realized we'd arrived. "*Oui.*"

With a knowing look, he turned to me, brushed his hand over my cheek, and said, "It's okay, *habibi*. You're gonna feel a lot better when we're done."

He was right. I was dreading the spanking, but I longed for the security and calm that I knew would follow it, the way a controlled burn revitalizes a forest by clearing out the undergrowth. I released a breath and nodded at him, and, smiling, he pressed the button to request entrance to the building.

The woman sitting at the front desk let us right up after he cheerfully told her who we were visiting, so very soon, we were standing at the apartment door. I tried not to hide behind him too obviously when Quint opened it.

"Please, come in," the older man said, stepping back to let us through. I felt my cheeks heat as we followed his invitation and he shut the door behind us.

Zain still had a firm grip on my right hand, but he held his other one out to Quint. "It's nice to meet face to face," he said. "We want to thank you for letting us do this."

"There's no thanks needed," Quint replied as they shook. "I'm glad I could help."

He was speaking to both of us, with that kind expression again, yet I couldn't answer or meet his eyes. After he dropped Zain's hand, he reached out and squeezed my shoulder, just briefly, and I remembered him sitting next to me on the couch that morning, rubbing the back of my neck while I held myself together with a wish and a prayer.

"I've closed the window blinds for you," he said. "Although no one could see into this apartment without a very good telescope, I thought it would make you more comfortable. I also wanted to mention that this entire building is well sound-proofed. Theo and I have lived here for years and have never gotten so much as an odd look in the hallway. It's as private as you can get in the city."

"Thanks, that's good to know," Zain said, as I blushed hotter and bit my lip.

"Well, I'll be going." He took a couple of reusable shopping bags off the hooks by the door. "Take as long as you need. You can call or text when you're done, and you don't have to wait for me to return before leaving, if you'd rather not. The grocery store is just around the corner."

Zain glanced at me and shrugged. "We'll play it by ear."

“Then if I don’t see you, have a safe trip back to Annapolis, and Seb, I hope to have you over for dinner again soon.”

I managed a nod while looking at the floor, and a second later, I heard him go out. Zain started towards the living room, but I pulled him back. “Take your shoes off.”

“Oh, sorry.”

I removed my sandals, too, and we left both pairs on the welcome mat. Then he hung his cover on one of the hooks and lifted my bag over my head before digging into it and coming out with the hairbrush. My heart skipped a beat.

“Do you know where they keep their washcloths?” he asked as he hung up the bag. “I want to get one for later.”

“There’s a shelf in the bathroom,” I said, with my eyes still on the brush.

“Which would be...?”

“Um, down the hall.” I showed him to it and watched him run cold water over a cloth and wring it out in the sink.

“That sofa looks comfy. C’mon.” He grabbed my hand once more and pulled me with him into the living room.

When he sat down on the middle cushion and let go of me, my fingers went automatically to the button of my fly. Just as automatically, he landed a hard swat with the hairbrush. I swallowed my yelp. Every time, I know that will happen if I try to do it myself, and yet I need the small ritual before I can let him take over.

Dropping the brush and washcloth on the coffee table, he hooked his hand into the front of my waistband and stood me between his legs before he took my jeans and underwear down to my knees with deliberate carefulness. “Okay, babe, over,” he said, turning and tugging me by the elbow.

I lowered myself across his knee. The couch was upholstered in a soft, burgundy fabric. For a split-second, I found myself wondering if Theo had ever stared at this same patch of it while in a similar position. Then Zain pinned his other leg over mine and patted the small of my back.

“Gimme your hands.”

Both of them? Again? Was this going to be our new routine? I didn’t like it at all. Slowly, I twisted my right arm behind my back and offered it to him.

He snorted and swatted me at the same time. “You know I said ‘hands’ not ‘hand.’ The other one, too.”

I made a face at the couch cushion as I gave up my other arm, and with it, my last bit of control.

“No biting the sofa, either,” he said. “Keep your head turned so I can see you.”

Merde. Tears were already gathering in the corners of my eyes, and he hadn’t even picked up the brush yet. A few leaked out when I closed my eyelids.

After he made sure he had a firm grip on my fingers, I felt him shift and reach across my back, and then cool wood resting against my skin. I couldn’t stop myself from wriggling away from it, making him tighten his hold to keep me in place.

I had been on the brink of all-out crying for a full twenty-four hours, since hearing my A1C at the endo’s office. Quint and Theo’s kindness that morning drove me closer, and after seeing Zain on the street, I was clinging to the edge with my fingertips. No wonder it took him only seconds of cracking the brush down on the undercurve of my buttocks to shove me into the maelstrom. Although he still had me secure in his grasp, I felt sure I would drown.

It was one of the shortest spankings I could remember. He didn’t even use his hand to finish, just put the brush down and started rubbing my back, talking in a soothing tone with words that got lost under my huge, wracking, pathetic sobs. When I finally quieted myself, he let go of my arms and turned me over to sit in his lap, and I clutched at his shoulders.

After a long while, he said, “Here, *habibi*,” holding me close with one arm as he leaned forward. “Let me wipe your face.”

I turned my head away from his neck enough to see he had the wet washcloth in his hand, and as I did, I happened to catch sight of his watch. Nearly half an hour had passed since we’d arrived. Appalled, I jerked away from him and attempted to stand. He yanked me down again.

“Whoa, hey! What just happened? You’re good one second, and the next—”

“The *time*,” I gasped. “Let me *up*.” I used both hands to push at the arm that was encircling my waist.

Under his breath, he said, “Jeez, I really *must* be out of practice,” and then, before I knew what was happening, he’d turned me facedown again and was setting fire to my behind once more, this time with his palm.

The second spanking was longer than the first. He broke through new dams holding back emotions and tears I didn't know I had in me, and kept on until I was quite sure everything had been emptied out. I lay limp, unable to care how my crying sounded, by the time he stopped.

"Gonna let *me* worry about the time now?" he asked, with a good-humored sort of exasperation.

I nodded, but instead of helping me up, he reached down to the floor and removed my jeans and underwear, which were now dangling from one foot, and then pulled my legs onto the couch and shifted us both so he was laying on his back with me on my stomach, on top of him. I rested my cheek against his collarbone and sniffled while he ran the washcloth over my face. It was wonderfully cool and calming, especially when he folded it into thirds and pressed it over my eyes.

"Sorry, babe," he said. "That was my fault. You can give me a spanking for it later, if you want." The image made me laugh, weakly. He lifted the washcloth, and I saw he was smiling, too. "Better?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I'm going to text Quint and let him know we're done. I'd like to stay here until he comes back, if that's okay with you."

Blinking, I asked, "Why?"

"What, you're the only one allowed to make new friends?" he teased.

I did want him to know both of them better, and when I thought about it, I found the idea of Quint seeing me now wasn't completely horrible. Plus, I needed to make up for my behavior before he'd left. "Alright, we can stay," I said.

"Awesome." Zain reached between us, into his pocket, and pulled out his phone. I watched him type *We're finished* and send it. Then he patted my back and said, "We should probably get you dressed again."

I had forgotten. I scrambled off of him and grabbed my underwear from the floor, but before I could put them on, he sat up and snatched them out of my hand. "Z, I don't need help!"

He tilted his head and grinned at me, and I decided not to test if he'd actually spank me a third time with Quint just minutes away. Making a face, I put my hands on his shoulders to keep my balance and stepped into the underwear as he held them for me. Then he repeated the procedure with my jeans and stood up, dropping a smack on my lips as he zipped and buttoned my fly.

His uniform was rumpled from laying on the couch. I helped him straighten it out as best as I could. That done, he said, "I want you to test again before we walk back."

So I was standing at the kitchen peninsula with my kit open in front of me when Quint walked in, Zain wrapped around me from behind and watching the meter count down over my shoulder. At least he let me do the test myself.

"Hello," Quint said, pleasantly.

"Hi," Zain replied. "We used one of your washcloths." He nodded to it, folded on the counter. "Hope you don't mind."

"No, of course not," the older man said, setting his grocery bags on the end of the peninsula and starting to unpack them like this was a perfectly normal situation.

I was blushing again, very aware that my eyes were probably still pink. Zain squeezed me in his arms, and I pressed back against his chest to feel the solid, reassuring strength of him before I spoke. "Um, I wanted to thank you. I didn't earlier."

Quint smiled. "As I said earlier, there's no need, and I'm glad to have helped. You look much calmer now."

"On target, too," Zain murmured in my ear as I ducked my head. The meter was showing a result of 110 mg/dl. To Quint, he said, "I don't think Seb ever mentioned what your medical specialty is."

"I'm a pediatric pulmonologist," he replied, turning away to put a bottle of juice into the refrigerator. "I direct a treatment center for children with asthma at a hospital uptown."

"Know any endocrinologists with super-excellent bedside manners?" Zain asked. I tried not to squirm as I packed up my kit again.

"Yes, actually, a couple. I can get you their contact information."

"That'd be awesome. You have my number now, so you can send it to both of us."

Quint nodded.

Glancing at his watch, Zain said, "Well, Mickey's big hand is on the ten. We should be going."

I saw Quint's gaze flick to the watch, too, and there was a hint of amusement in his voice when he said, "Would you like me to show you downstairs?"

“Nah, we’re good, thanks,” Zain said. He kept me close to him as we went to the door and slid our shoes back on. Then he took his cover from the hook and tucked it under one arm while looping the other around my waist.

“I’d, um, appreciate it if you didn’t tell Theo about any of this?” I asked Quint.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said. “I’ll get you that contact information by tomorrow.”

Zain thanked him again, and they exchanged goodbyes before we left.

On the street, I tried to slip sideways out of his embrace. He patted my hip. Sighing, I gave up. “Where did you park the car?”

“A parking garage, but there’s another hour before I have to leave, brat. We’re going back to your dorm for a chat,” he said, and then grinned. “Hey, I made a rhyme!”

I opened my mouth and closed it again without saying anything. *A chat about what?! I’m calm now, really!*

If we got more looks on the way back, I was too preoccupied to notice them.

Music pounded from behind my apartment door as we stepped off the elevator. “Oh, good, your roommates are here!” Zain said, and before I could stop him, he’d opened the door and gone through.

Mark and Calvin were sitting on the loveseat crammed into the corner of the common room, playing a video game. One of them had brought a TV from home, but they’d forgotten to get a stand for it, so it was on the floor. They didn’t look up until Zain stood right in front of the screen.

“Hi, guys!” he said over the music, giving them both a jaunty wave as they blinked at him. “You must be two of Seb’s roommates. I’m Zain, his fiancé. We’ll be out of your hair in a minute, I promise. We’re gonna go in his room and talk. I was just wondering if you could turn the music down, so we don’t have to shout.”

They blinked some more. I suspected they were both high out of their minds. Eventually, Calvin picked up the remote and pressed a button, and the volume decreased to a normal level.

“That’s perfect, thanks!” said Zain. The words had barely left his mouth before I grabbed his arm and dragged him into my room.

"I cannot *believe* you did that!"

"Oh, relax, babe. Did it seem like they were upset?" he asked. "The state they're in, they'll probably forget about me in two minutes. It's a shame, really. If I thought it'd do any good right now, I'd sit you down with them and we could all work out the issues together."

The idea was horrifying. I hate being seen as the one who needs special treatment, an inconvenience to everyone else. None of the other residents in my building seemed to have a problem with my roommates, so why should I? I could deal with it.

Part of me wished Zain would just leave it alone, and part of me hoped if I pushed it far enough, his protectiveness would take over and he'd say what I wanted to say without me having to be involved at all. As much as I didn't want him fighting my battles, I wanted to fight them myself even less.

Coward, I thought.

Zain, meanwhile, had taken his shoes off, climbed onto my bed, and laid on his side with one hand propping his head up. He patted the duvet next to him. "C'mere. We're gonna have a staring contest while we talk."

I grimaced. It had *not* been that bad recently. It wasn't my fault that you can't gaze deeply into someone's eyes via Skype.

Using a lot more effort than I wanted to admit to, I made myself join him on the bed. Even with both of us on our sides, there wasn't enough room to put any sort of distance between us, especially since he was in the middle of the mattress already, leaving me a narrow strip between him and the edge.

"Can't you scooch over a little?" I asked as I arranged my pillow under my head.

"Nope," he said, popping the 'p' at the end. I was close enough to feel the puff of air, close enough for him to tangle our feet together and rest his free hand on my butt. "Look at me, babe — with both eyes. Don't bury half your face in that pillow."

Sighing, I shifted so it wasn't blocking my view and met his gaze squarely at point-blank range. It was brimming with resolution and affection in equal measure. He wasn't going to let me up again until I could maintain eye contact without blinking excessively or squirming. Either would usually get me swatted. I wasn't willing to see if the same held true when my roommates were sitting on the other side of a thin door.

This seems like a simple task, and some days it is. Other days, it's nearly impossible. I don't do well with vulnerability and no hope of concealment. To make it easier, I started naming the shades of brown in his irises, although I knew them already. *Bronze, chestnut, mahogany, sienna, bole...*

He laughed and patted the seat of my jeans. "Hey, stop that."

"*What?*" I asked. "I didn't look away at all!"

"You're painting me in your head," he said. "The point of this is for you to be here, with me, not off in a mental studio."

I bit back a curse. "Didn't you say we were going to talk?"

"Yeah, in a couple of minutes."

"Z, you don't have time for this!"

He gave me a lazy smile. "Really? We're back at that?"

My heart skipped a beat and sped up as I tensed under his hand. The ice beneath me was paper-thin, but this was too important. If he wanted to spank me again for worrying, so be it. First, though, I was going to say my piece.

"I'm *serious*, Zain. You can't risk this. I can't be the reason." I made sure my tone showed only determination, not panic, and I saw him react to it and become more solemn himself. "This... this is what I was afraid of, remember?" I asked. "That day we decided I'd spend the summer in Santa Cruz, I told you my fear was that I wouldn't be able to handle it, and you'd have to leave to take care of me."

Stroking his palm over my hip, he said, "You *are* handling it, and I haven't left the Academy. I just took a little unauthorized field trip."

He still didn't understand. My throat tightened, making breathing difficult. Somehow, I had to get him to see. I hadn't planned on telling him about the nightmare, but I heard myself saying, "I fell asleep on Theo's couch this morning, and I dreamt that you were carrying me down a hospital hallway like... I—like I meant nothing, and your tattoo was just a scar, and ev—every step was torture for you."

So much for a calm, determined voice. I had to stop before I really went to pieces.

Zain's whole face softened. He moved me even closer and cupped his hand over my cheek, wrapping me in his gaze the same way he wraps me in his arms. "*Habibi*," he said, measured and steady as a mountain, "you are not a burden."

My next exhale turned into a whimpering little sob. I clamped my lips together to hold it back.

That's the heart of everything: my fear of being a millstone around the necks of the people I love. I try to believe it's not true, I really do, but the evidence seems stacked against me. Evidence like him deciding to risk his entire future just because I had gotten stressed and couldn't handle it without him.

I wiped my eyes and said, "Promise me you won't come here like this again."

"No."

"*Please.*"

He shook his head. "Think about what you're asking me to do, babe. I am never going to promise *not* to be there for you when you need me."

Of course, he was right. I might as well ask him to stop his heart from beating.

Fine, I thought. *Then I promise not to let this happen again.* I would prevent another meltdown at all costs, and if I failed, I would make sure he couldn't find out. I would go as far as lying to him to protect him.

Resolving myself, I deliberately slowed my breathing and relaxed, and when I was sure I could have the right tone, I said, "I understand."

A second later, I was on my back, pressed between his weight and the mattress with no regard for my sensitive rear end. He had my shoulders pinned down with his hands, but my arms were free. If I fought, I might succeed. Instead, I forced myself to be still and to keep looking into his eyes.

With a dangerous grin, he asked, "Do you honestly think I don't know when you're closing yourself off, Seb?"

"You didn't yesterday," I said, and it came out as an accusation. A flash of pain crossed his beautiful features and lodged itself in my heart, and I forgot all about being calm. I burst into tears, surging up to clutch him around the shoulders. "I didn't mean that!"

He rolled us onto our sides again so he could push his hand under my shirt's hem and rub my back while I apologized over and over in French. I heard him repeating, "It's okay, *habibi*, it's okay."

It *wasn't* okay, though.

"I hurt you," I choked out.

"Pfft, not even a scratch," he said. "And anyway, when people love each other, they sometimes get unintentionally hurt. It's not the end of the world, right?" When I didn't answer, he turned his head and spoke directly into my ear. "Riiiiighhtt?"

I nodded.

There was a smirk in his voice as he added, "Also, I'm a big, strong Marine, y'know. Oorah."

Jerk. I landed a glancing blow on his bicep, and he pulled back with an exaggerated wince.

"Ow! Talk about hurt—"

"Oh, shut it," I sniffled.

He laughed and gave me a quick, sweet kiss before I yanked up the bottom of my t-shirt and used it to clean my face once more. His uniform had a damp patch near the collar, but I couldn't do much to fix that.

"This is what I wanted to talk to you about," he said as he watched me. "Last night, I sensed something was wrong, but without being able to see you, I didn't realize how bad it was. Babe, I'm so sorry." I opened my mouth to tell him not to apologize, it was my fault, and he pressed his hand to my lips and smacked another kiss on the back of his own fingers before continuing. "I've been thinking we need a fallback system, like the meter logs over the summer, so you'll know I'm going to find out eventually, and you'll stop worrying about hiding things from me. What do you think?" He lowered his hand so I could talk.

I made an involuntary face. "You want me to send you my logs again?"

"No, it has to be broader. I need verification of your mood, not just your glucose levels."

"So... what, then?"

He said, simply, "Quint."

I frowned. "Quint would take the place of my meter logs?"

“Hear me out,” he said, with the look he gets when he has a plan he knows I’m not going to like. “What if you had dinner over there regularly?”

My mouth dropped open. “So he could report back to you?”

“No,” said Zain, patiently, “so he could encourage you to talk to me if you’re getting stressed out again, like he did today.”

“And what if I still don’t want to talk to you?” I demanded.

He shrugged. “Well then, yes, he’d let me know something was up. He did that this morning, too, when you didn’t want to tell me about the tree.”

“That was *different*.”

“Was it?” he asked, smiling. “How?”

I didn’t know how, but it *was*, dammit. Rather than argue with him, I seized on my next point of objection. “I can look after myself.”

“Yeah, you can,” he agreed. “You don’t have to prove that to me. That’s when you get into trouble. But looking after yourself doesn’t mean you have to be completely self-sufficient, babe. If you don’t let anyone help you when you need help, you *aren’t* taking care of yourself at all.”

“Quint said something like that, too,” I told him, shifting uncomfortably.

Smiling, he said, “Well, he seems like a wise man.”

He did. Still, I couldn’t see how this would work. “He doesn’t know me like you do.”

“That’s true. I’d have to give him the rundown on what to watch for — and some of it I can’t, it’s pure instinct,” Zain said. “I think getting you out of that tree shows he’s got what’s needed, though.”

I looked away as I thought it over, and he let me. I remembered how I’d felt when I believed he was conspiring with my siblings to have them babysit me. This wasn’t at all like that. If I didn’t agree to it, he’d drop the idea. I only had to tell him ‘no.’ So why wasn’t I saying that right now?

“*Habibi*, what happened yesterday... I don’t want it to happen a second time.” He stopped and seemed to gather himself before he went on, with a touch of amusement. “I’d just like for someone to tell me about the warning signs I’m missing, and I know that won’t be you, because you’ll panic and think you can’t possibly let me know because if you do, you’ll be a burden to

me, and then the stress of hiding it will make you panic even more, and then you'll be up a tree without a paddle again."

I groaned heavily. "Up a *tree* without a *paddle*? How long have you been waiting to use that?"

"Since I thought of it about halfway through the drive."

"You're horrible."

"I know." He looked very pleased about it, too. Stroking over the skin between my shoulderblades, he asked, "Do you see how this could work, though?"

I didn't want to, but I did. It was better than my plan to lie to him, anyway. Even so, I shook my head. "Quint would have to be okay with it. He's not going to want me hanging out over there all the time, intruding on his and Theo's life together."

"How 'bout we actually see what they think before deciding you'd be a huge inconvenience?" Zain asked, dryly. "He did say he'd love to have you for dinner again soon."

"That was just politeness," I objected.

He rolled his eyes. "If I talk to him about it, and he and Theo both swear that they really, truly don't mind, would you have dinner over there, say, once a week?"

I wanted some assurance of my own before agreeing to anything. "If I hadn't climbed a tree this morning, would you still have come to see me?"

"No, I would've had *you* come see *me*," he said, and I blinked in surprise. Cheerfully, he added, "I already had the car rental place picked out, since there weren't any bus tickets left, but when I saw you, I knew you couldn't drive that far."

Which meant he'd decided on the spanking before even finding out about the tree. That was comforting, somehow. Then I imagined four hours of travel, knowing what I was heading towards, and sitting on a sore butt all the way back. Was that what would happen in the future? He couldn't be serious! The alternative, though....

"So, if we do this," I said, slowly, "you won't come up here again?"

With a snort, he said, "I already told you, I'm not going to promise anything of that kind. But I'd say it'd significantly lower the odds that I'd *have* to do this again."

That sealed it. "Okay."

“Yeah?”

I nodded.

“Awesome,” he said. “Now, we’re gonna have a staring contest for another five minutes, and then I’ll be on my way.”

It was much easier to meet his eyes now. I brought my awareness to them the way I bring it to my breath when I meditate, and allowed myself to simply be with him for a peaceful interlude.

When he murmured that it was time to go, I almost wanted to protest. Then I remembered what would happen if he stayed. I sighed and rolled off the bed.

We walked across the street and into the parking garage where he had left the car in silence, holding hands again. “This is it,” he said, nodding towards a silver sedan on the first level. “I’ll call Quint on the way back and discuss things with him, and then I’ll let you know how it went, okay?”

“Yeah,” I said, as my stomach flipped over. Why did I agree to that?

He turned to face me and captured my mouth in a deep kiss. “It’ll be alright, *habibi*,” he said against my lips. “You aren’t alone.”

I blinked back tears as I nodded.

“Now, I want you to go eat, and then color a mandala. Get a move on.” A not-gentle swat on the rear sent me off.

Just before the exit, I stopped to look back at him, still standing next to the car. He made a shooing motion with one hand. Rolling my eyes, I left him there.

Chapter Twelve

I waited until I was out of the city and back on the New Jersey turnpike, headed south, to call Quint, so I could give the conversation most of my attention. What I was asking him to do was a bit unorthodox. I needed to explain it right.

“Hello, Zain,” he answered.

“Hey,” I said. “I know I’ve already taken up a lot of your time today, but do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Yes, of course. Everything all right?”

He didn’t have to specify ‘with Seb;’ I knew that’s where his mind would be.

“He’s much better than he was,” I said, “although it’s still going to take him some time. That was a bad one.” Seb had been right when he’d said I didn’t see him closing himself off until it was too late. I’d failed him. My remorse made me all the more determined to set up a safety net. “It never should have gotten to that point. I suspected when I called him last night something was up, but I completely missed how far gone he was.”

“Zain, I know you want to be perfect for him,” Quint said. “Just remember, even if you’re a Top, you’re still human. Mistakes are unavoidable.”

Change a few words, and he’d sound like my old Academy counselor.

“Have you ever missed something that big with Theo?” I asked.

Ruefully, he said, “Yes, this past Monday. And Theo’s meltdowns are much noisier than Seb’s, yet I still overlooked the beginning of it. These things happen. It’s what you do when you find out that matters.”

“Which brings me to why I’m calling,” I said. “We talked after we left your place about how to prevent it from happening again. The problem is, I’m headed back to Annapolis right now, and our communication while I’m there is severely limited. We text and Skype as much as possible, but it’s not enough. Especially when he’s going out of his way to make sure I don’t know when he’s stressed because he doesn’t want me worrying.”

“That did seem to be his main objection to telling you this morning,” Quint said, and I laughed.

“Yep, that’s typical Seb.” I checked my side-view mirror and merged into the right lane before I decided to get to the point. “You and I hardly know each other, so this is going to seem odd.”

“More odd than you borrowing my apartment to spank your fiancé?”

“Well, maybe the same level of odd,” I allowed, grinning. “But Seb trusts you, which goes a long way towards making me trust you, too, and I could really use another set of eyes on him. Do you think you could maybe have him over for dinner and gentle interrogation every so often? And then, if you see him getting stressed and I don’t know about it, convince him to spill the beans, like you did this morning, or, as a last resort, tell me yourself?”

Quint didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he asked, “Seb agreed to this?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Mainly because he doesn’t want me risking getting into major trouble with the Academy by coming up here again, but he did agree, so long as you and Theo are okay with it.”

“Theo won’t mind at all,” he said, “and I’ll help any way I can.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. That makes me feel a hundred percent better about leaving him.”

“We’ve become fond of him as well,” said Quint, warmly. “What you two are doing is... I can’t imagine it. If I can make it easier on you both, I’m happy to. Anything in particular I should be on the lookout for?”

Snorting, I said, “Oh, so many things. Can you text me your email address? I’ll send you some of my hard-earned knowledge tomorrow.”

“Of course,” he replied.

“Awesome. Okay, I better call Seb and let him know we’re all set before he gets himself too worked up about it,” I said. “Thanks again.”

“It’s my pleasure.”

I hung up thinking Seb and I were both lucky that he’d forged a friendship with these guys, especially since that doesn’t come naturally to my boy.

When I told him the plan was a go, he said, “That’s... good,” in a voice that was trying very hard not to sound nervous.

“*Habibi*, you know if you change your mind, you only have to tell me.”

“I haven’t changed my mind,” he said. “How did he react when you asked him?”

“He wanted to know if it was okay with you, which I think is a good sign. Then he said they’re fond of you, and he’d be glad to lend us a hand.” Grinning, I added, “So to speak, because him actually, physically lending a hand would be a whole other conversation.”

“Would you– would that– um, I mean...”

I rescued him before he stumbled over any more words. “Would we have that conversation in the future? Possibly. I don’t see any reason for it right now, but I’m not ruling it out. It would still be only with everyone’s consent, including yours, babe.”

There was a moment of silence as he digested that. Good. I wanted to make sure he was viewing Quint as not only a friend, but as a Top — someone safe to turn to, and someone who wouldn’t hesitate to call him on hiding things. Having the idea of Quint spanking him in the back of his mind, however vague and hypothetical, would help.

“How’s the mandala coming?” I asked.

“Um,” he said, and I could practically see him blink at the change of subject. “I finished it.”

I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. “Already? You must’ve picked a pretty simple design. Do another one.”

He huffed. “Zain.”

“Or two. I’m not picky.”

“No! I’ll do *one* more,” he said. “An intricate one.”

“Kay. Send me a picture when you’re finished.” I heard him mutter something in French, and I smiled again. “*Pardon, mon cher?*”

“Nevermind,” he said. “*Je t’aime*. Text me when you get back.”

“I will. Love you, too.”

An hour and a half later, I got two pictures from him. The first of him holding up both mandalas, and the second of him sticking out his tongue. I set that as my wallpaper.

“One jump ahead of the hoofbeats! One hop ahead of the hump! One trick ahead of disaster! They’re quick, but I’m much faster! Here goes, better throw my hand in, wish me happy landing, all I gotta do is juuummmpp!”

I turned onto Klatsky's street as I finished my rendition of 'One Jump Ahead,' and saw him emerge from his house to meet me. Pulling up, I put the car in park and climbed into the passenger's side while he walked to the end of the driveway and opened the door.

"Cutting it close, aren't you?" he asked.

"I've got twenty-five minutes still," I said. "Just drop me off a bit nearer to the Yard than where you picked me up, so I don't have to walk as far."

"You got it."

The song was now stuck in my head. I whistled it as he drove through the dark streets, tapping on the dash to do the more complicated parts.

"I'd forgotten how you're always singing or humming or whistling," Klatsky said, near the end.

I broke off, laughing. "Sorry. This is a good spot to get rid of me. The gate's around the corner."

"Alright."

He stopped, but I made no move to get out. I could see a couple standing under a streetlight at the end of the block, and if I squinted... "Shit. That's my company commander."

Klatsky followed my nod. "He looks like a hardass."

"The woman," I corrected him, and he chuckled.

"Even worse. Want me to take you another route?"

I shook my head. "No, she already spotted me."

I'd seen Cameron and Myrick both looking our way, and I wasn't wearing the leather jacket to cover my summer whites. They might not know who was in the car exactly, but they definitely knew it was a midshipman. Leaving would only raise more suspicion.

"Your funeral," Klatsky said as I reached for the door handle. "Good luck."

"Thanks," I said.

After getting out, I did a quick check that my uniform was in order, and then marched double-time towards the upperclassmen. They were talking to each other in low voices, yet looking at

me. I stopped three feet in front of them and came to attention. "Good evening, ma'am. Good evening, sir."

"Mohyeldin," said Cameron. "Brian tells me you don't have a sponsor family."

Brian? I thought. *Oh, right, Myrick's first name.* My gaze flicked to him. His face was impassive.

"No, ma'am, I don't."

"Who was that, then?" she asked, pointing behind me.

In these cases, it's best to give as little information as possible while still being truthful. "A friend, ma'am," I said.

She arched an eyebrow at me, reminding me of our meeting over the 'Be Our Guest' incident. "Is your friend a member of Naval Academy staff or faculty?"

"No, ma'am," I admitted.

"Then why were you in a vehicle with him, in violation of regs?"

"He was giving me a ride back from his house. If I had walked, I would have missed taps, ma'am."

"Where is his house?"

"In Annapolis," I said, and when she raised the other brow, I added, "I'll find out the exact address, ma'am."

"Is that the only place you went today?"

I hesitated, and then decided to use the Academy's version of pleading the fifth. I would've rather avoided letting on that I was hiding anything to begin with, but I had no choice. "A reply would be using my honor against me, ma'am."

She and Myrick glanced at each other. I kept my face expressionless.

"Very well," Cameron said. "I'm going to write up a fry tomorrow morning. Report to the company area for taps."

"Aye, ma'am," I said, and headed around them, toward the gate.

A 'fry' was a report of a conduct violation. All she had, though, was me riding as a passenger in an unauthorized vehicle — a minor offense. As long as no one dug into it too much, I'd be fine.

I texted Seb simply, *I'm here. Love you. Sweet dreams!*

The next morning, I slept late. JJ had already left for chapel service when I awoke, giving me privacy to write to Quint. First, though, I lay in my rack and texted Seb again.

Good morning, babe! Remember I said I'd have to tell Quint what to look for with you? I'm emailing him that today. Anything in particular you want me to mention?

The three-dot animation indicating that he was writing back seemed to go on forever, yet when he finally sent his response, it said, *Not that I can think of.*

I snorted. *Really, brat? Nothing at all? I'm gonna tell him he can call you by your full name. That cool?*

After a minute, he wrote, *Yeah. As long as he pronounces it right.*

I started to type, *Don't worry, I'll warn him*, but then I saw the indicator again. I waited, not wanting to interrupt his thought.

Can you ask him if he's going to want me to call him 'sir' sometimes?

There was a sense of trepidation behind the words. Immediately, I sent, *He's not*, and then followed it up with, *I'll tell him that's only between us.*

What if he thinks it's disrespectful not to?

Too bad, so sad, I wrote, and added a *:P* for good measure. If Quint *did* mind, he wasn't what we were looking for. *You can call him any title you want except that. I'm the only 'sir' in your life, my boy. Got it?*

Yes, *sir*, he replied, and I could picture him rolling his eyes, though I knew he was relieved.

Good boy. I'm going to write it now. It'll probably take awhile, so just let me know if you think of anything else.

I will.

Climbing down from my rack, I sat at my desk and woke up the computer. Then I opened a new email from my personal account and started typing.

It wasn't easy. I needed to give Quint the most accurate picture I could, and some of it was things I'd never verbalized to myself before. More than once, I wished I had Seb's artistic abilities. I could see in my mind's eye exactly what he looks like when he's withholding something, yet I couldn't put it on paper. Quint was a Top, too, though, and he'd already shown he had good instincts. I needed to trust them and do my best.

Nearly two hours later, I thought I had a decent cheatsheet. I read it over one more time, trying to spot anything I'd missed.

Subject: The Care and Feeding of Sébastien Leon McKenna Crews (Abridged)

Hi Quint,

First of all, thank you again. This is going to be a huge help, I think.

Second, Seb knows I'm sending you a list, but not what it says, exactly. Him knowing his own "tells" would kinda defeat the purpose. Some he's well aware of already, though.

*Third, feel free to use his full name if you feel it would encourage him to talk. Personally, I never have, but I call him "babe" most of the time, so when I say "Seb," it carries enough weight on its own. "Leon" has the French pronunciation, too. Don't worry, if you get it wrong, he **will** correct you immediately. :D*

*On the subject of French, him speaking it to you when he knows you're not fluent is a sign that he's feeling strong emotions about something, especially when he doesn't realize he's switched languages. You can ask him to repeat himself in English. He's never intentionally mistranslated with me, but I don't know if he would with you, so you might want to brush up on your skills. Refusing to translate is a **major** warning sign, unless it's just swear words or insults. He's shy about saying those in English sometimes, even though I don't mind.*

Other bad signs:

- *Hiding/climbing — Pro tip: If you don't know where he is, look up. Trees, roofs, fire escapes, attics, etc. Don't discount other places, though. He sometimes likes dark/confined areas, and art studios are always a good bet. When you do find him, you need to make him feel safe. You can ask him to come down like you did yesterday, but really avoid forcing him. Also, if he's sitting with both knees up in front of him, or has his arms crossed over his chest? That's hiding, too. Again, just try to make him feel safe.*

- *Not being “present” with you, i.e, not paying attention, focusing on other things*
- *Excessive drawing/painting, to the point where he forgets or refuses to eat and gets a low blood sugar — I need to be notified immediately if this happens.*
- *Lack of eye contact (Although he’s going to have less around you to begin with, because he doesn’t know you as well as me, so give him time.) — It’s okay to ask him to look you in the eyes. How he reacts will tell you a lot.*
- *Evasive answers/non-answers to direct questions (a bit obvious, yes)*
- *Defensiveness about his ability to take care of himself (you weren’t implying he couldn’t, yet he takes it that way)*
- *Hiding blood sugars, especially an unexplained high — I want to be clear, he is completely capable of managing his diabetes all by himself. Don’t interfere in his treatment (not that I think you would) unless it’s an emergency or I specifically ask you to. But if you see signs of a high (grumpiness, tiredness, drinking and peeing A LOT, irrationality, fruity-smelling breath, headaches), or a low (shaking, paleness, sweating, slipping into French for no reason or not being able to find the word he wants in English, confusion, clumsiness and weakness, irrationality, headaches), and he’s denying it, that’s typically a sign there’s something underlying causing it that he doesn’t want you to know about. Stress raises his levels directly, and it can also lead to lows if he tries to distract himself to the point of not eating.*
- *Avoiding you altogether — If he cancels any plans with you or Theo, make sure I know.*
- *A particular kind of quietness — Sorry this one is so vague. I can’t really describe the difference between Seb being quiet because that’s just who he is, and Seb being quiet because there’s something on his mind. It’s very subtle, and probably not anything you’ll be able to pick up on anytime soon, but I want to include it for completeness.*
- *The Good Boy Act — When you know that he has a reason to be annoyed or that he doesn’t want to do what you told him, yet he’s perfectly docile. It’s a form of non-physical hiding, and a misdirection strategy; he doesn’t want you pushing any more. (He pulled this on you in the park, by the way, when he came down from the tree.) I know some Tops believe that obedience and respect include a “good attitude,” but I would much rather Seb grumble, make faces, and swear at me than bury his feelings. Venting is healthy for him. Not to say he should **never** simply comply, but it’s a rarity, and when he does it honestly, you’ll notice the difference in how calm he is — especially if you pay attention to his body language. Which brings me to the last one:*

- *Tense muscles/fidgeting/biting — It's usually easier to spot the tension when he's sleeping, oddly enough. Fidgeting can also be a sign he's uncomfortable in a social situation. Biting is pretty extreme and means he's trying not to cry. He bites his skin, usually on his wrist or hand, not his fingernails.*

So, if you notice any of those behaviors, he's probably stressed. It might take a little digging to figure out why, but here's some common things:

- *Worrying about me (which is going to be an issue soon, though I need to tell him about that first)*
- *Thinking he's hurt someone he cares about (which now includes you and Theo, just so you know), made them worry about him, or inconvenienced them in some way, no matter how minor*
- *Major changes*
- *Schoolwork — He hasn't had any formal schooling prior to college (he can explain that better than me), and he's feeling out of his element. The diabetes doesn't help. Part of the reason for his appointment on Friday was to set up disability accommodations at school, and **that** took a lot of convincing.*
- *Socializing with strangers, or too much socializing even with people he knows well*
- *Conflict — he is a conflict-avoidance CHAMP, lemme tell ya*
- *Feeling like a "bad diabetic" because his blood sugars are out of control*
- *Attention being drawn to his diabetes, or it preventing him from doing something*

I think that gives you a good idea of where to start.

One last note: He won't call you "sir." Please don't take that as disrespect. It has a special meaning between us, and neither of us would be comfortable with him using it with someone else.

Let me know if anything needs clarification.

–Zain

It seemed pretty comprehensive. If I thought of anything else, I could always email him again. I clicked 'send,' feeling a bit like I was handing over a secret playbook.

As I did, my Academy email program dinged with an incoming message. I switched the window and found it was a notification of a Form-2, the official name for a fry. Cameron hadn't wasted any time, if it had already made its way to me.

Opening it, I scanned down to the "Primary Offense" field. It read, *02.03: Violation of MIDREGS with minor effect, Article 4.2 Section d), regarding 4/C Midshipmen riding in personal vehicles driven by authorized drivers*. Good. That meant they still didn't know I'd driven the vehicle myself, and left the tri-city area with it. There was no Primary Investigating Officer assigned, either. For minor-level offenses, they often didn't bother to investigate further. I only needed to keep it that way.

I was reading over the incident summary when JJ came in, saying, "So you'll help me whoop his ass?"

Platt stepped through the doorway after him and glared at me with his arms crossed over his chest. "Did you *tell* him to invite me?"

"Invite you where?" I asked, frowning at them.

"My sponsor's this Saturday," JJ answered, "to play Call of Duty."

"Oh," I said. "No, I didn't." I *had* mentioned that Platt was without a sponsor and could probably use one, but he didn't need to know that.

"See?" said JJ. "I just saw you as we were leaving the Chapel and figured you'd be good backup." Jerking his thumb at me, he added, "He don't play fair."

I laughed. "I play better than you, and you interpret that as 'not fair.' He's pathetic, Platt. If you don't have plans, he could really use your help."

Platt looked between us suspiciously, like he thought it was a trap. After a couple of seconds, though, he nodded. "Sure, I can come."

"Great!" JJ said. He turned to open his closet and started changing into PT gear.

As he undressed, Platt flushed and averted his gaze. I saw the moment it landed on my computer screen. He took two steps closer. "Is that a fry?"

"Yep," I said.

His eyes widened, and for a second he almost looked like Seb when he's worried. Then he scowled at me. "What'd you do?"

I read off the incident summary, “*At 23:45 on September 26, 2015, Midshipmen Myrick and I — meaning Cameron — ‘witnessed Midshipman Mohyeldin exit the passenger side of a vehicle on King George Street. Upon questioning, Midshipman Mohyeldin confirmed the driver was not a Naval Academy sponsor, faculty member, or staff member, and was not a 1/C or 2/C midshipman.’* In other words, I caught a ride with a friend and *got* caught myself. But it’s a minor offense.”

JJ emerged from his t-shirt and leaned on the back of my chair to read over my shoulder. “Yeah, *really* minor,” he said. “Wonder why she didn’t just give you a warning and EMI.”

Shrugging, I said, “It’s her prerogative.”

“Her and Myrick are ones to talk,” said Platt, “with the way they were fraternizing while they were still in the same company. I bet if we told her we knew about that, she’d withdraw the fry.”

I spun around in my chair to give him an incredulous look. “I thought you liked Cameron and Myrick.”

Glowering harder, he said, “The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, just... blackmail is a little extreme?” I suggested. JJ seemed taken aback, too. Platt glanced from him to me, and then dropped his eyes to the deck.

“It was a stupid idea,” he muttered. “Forget I said anything.”

“Forgotten,” I said, easily.

Still, I wondered where that had come from. Did he have some reason to be upset with Myrick and Cameron? I knew he was closer to Myrick, but he’d never shown any obvious sign of being jealous of Cameron before, that I could think of, and his anger appeared to be directed at both of them. I didn’t know what to make of it.

“So, what are you going to do?” JJ asked, bringing my attention back to the fry.

“Oh, I’ll plead guilty and tell them the truth,” I said, silently adding, *Well, part of the truth.* “Klatsky picked me up yesterday and drove me to his house, and eleven hours later, he drove me back.”

JJ snorted. “What’d you do for eleven hours?”

“Played Call of Duty,” I said, with a grin. “You gotta practice to be as good as me. I’m gonna kick both your asses on Saturday.”

“Yeah, keep talking,” JJ said. “I’m not worried. I got a buddy now.”

He held up his fist to Platt, who hesitantly bumped his own against it, like he wasn’t sure how, and then said, “I have to go do homework.”

I barely had time to say, “See you later,” before he was gone.

JJ closed the door behind him, shaking his head. “That kid needs to get out more.”

I agreed, but more than that, he needed friends. Hopefully, JJ would be one soon. I also wanted to get Platt and Seb talking again. My boy would see what I was missing with Cameron and Myrick, I had no doubt. I kept musing on it as I turned back to my computer and started writing my statement into the fry.

Chapter Thirteen

Before Zain sent his email outlining all the many ways I build up my defenses, he asked me if there were things I wanted to include. I said, *not that I can think of*, because, on the contrary, I wanted to leave things out. I wanted emergency escape hatches. I wanted to read the whole thing before he sent it. I wanted to be able to fool Quint, and I wanted to finally know myself as deeply as Zain knows me.

He holds my only skeleton key, and now he was making a copy and handing it over to someone else. Even with my consent, even with the knowledge that the key didn't open all the locks, I wanted some reassurance that a few things were ours, alone.

Things like the word "sir."

I've read online that Brats sometimes find themselves naturally calling their Tops by that title when they're in trouble, or the Tops insist on it, as a form of respect. It's never been like that with us. In fact, the first time I ever called him "sir" predated the discipline by years. We'd been teenagers, still living with my parents. Late one night, we were making out on the roof, him nibbling over the pulse point on my neck, and it just slipped out.

"Please, sir."

I didn't realize I'd said it until he whispered in my ear, "'Please, sir,' what?" and suddenly a door I had never even seen opened, onto a part of me as limitless and frightening and beautiful and *right* as the stars above us.

Since then, he's the only person I've ever called "sir." It was too intimate to share. When I asked about Quint using it, he told me it would stay between us, with a cavalier attitude I knew was mostly for show. It worked. I relaxed some about whatever else the email would say, and was able to have a productive Sunday doing assignments. I felt focused, recentered in a way even meditation and yoga hadn't offered in weeks.

On Sunday nights, JJ and Zain usually have a meeting of Semper Fi Society, the Academy's association for Marines. I wasn't expecting him to Skype me. When I picked up, he said, "Hey, *habibi*, I have something to tell you. Before I do, remember, it's not a big deal."

My gut twisted. It's never good when he starts off by reassuring me. "What?"

"When I got back last night, Klatsky gave me a ride to the Yard, and my company commander and Myrick both saw me getting out of the passenger side of his car." My mouth fell open, but he

rushed on before I could say anything. “It’s a minor offense, babe. The most I could get is 25 demerits and some Extra Duty. That’s not even enough to drop my conduct grade down from an A. It’s fine, okay?”

Fine?!

“The *most* you could get?” I asked. “So you don’t *know*?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I pled guilty this morning and waived my right to a hearing, but I just got notice that Cameron — that’s my company commander — wants one anyway.”

“Wait.” I frowned. “You knew about this earlier today?”

Nodding, he replied, “Yeah, I knew about it last night, when she saw me.”

I had to blink a few times, to try to make sense of that. My voice still betrayed my confusion, though, as I said, “You didn’t say anything.”

He shrugged, like it wasn’t worth mentioning. “I wanted to see how it would pan out first, so you didn’t need to be unnecessarily worried.”

“Zain! You— you can’t *do* that!” I sputtered.

He scrunched up his forehead. “Do what?”

“You’re always telling me you’ll be worried about me if you want to be,” I said, “and that me keeping stuff from you worries you more, and then you do *this*? It’s a double standard!”

“Ohhhh, right. Yeah, I can see how you’d think that, but actually, no.”

For a second, indignation took my breath away. If I had been in the same room with him, I would’ve hit him. “What do you mean, *no*?”

“The standard’s the same as it’s always been, babe,” he explained cheerfully. “Your health comes first. Stress affects your health in a way it doesn’t mine, so yeah, I’m going to take steps to reduce needless amounts of it. Plus, unlike you, I was never planning to keep this a secret indefinitely. Just for twenty-four hours at most, so you didn’t have to wait in limbo about it.”

My health. Of course. *Don’t bother Sebby; he’s sick.*

Shrugging again, he added, “At least, that was the idea, before Cameron scheduled the hearing. I really wish she hadn’t, but since she did, and it’s going to take a few more days now before I know the punishment, I decided to tell you tonight.”

I bit my tongue for a moment, and then asked, “Why did she schedule a hearing?”

“Not sure. When she questioned me last night, it seemed like she was trying to get me to admit to something. I’m thinking this is just so she can interrogate me some more.”

My eyes widened. “What if she knows you drove—?”

“She doesn’t,” Zain said, quickly. “I have a right to know about any evidence against me, and they haven’t provided any. They’re not even investigating it. *Habibi*, I promise you, this is not a big deal. Okay?”

I wasn’t going to truly believe that until after the hearing. And even then, knowing I’d put a blemish on his record... But I nodded.

He cocked his head and smiled. “You’re still mad at me for not telling you, huh?”

Huffing, I muttered, “Well, it *is* a double standard.”

“Okay, maybe it is,” he agreed easily. “So, wanna come down and spank me?”

“Zain, be serious for five seconds.”

“I am! If that’s a double standard, then we can’t have two different ways of dealing with it, because that would be a *double* double standard! Trust me, I’m good at the math stuff.”

Okay, I saw his point, maybe. Our entire relationship could be considered a double standard if you looked at it that way. We didn’t. The standard wasn’t ‘we both get the same things,’ it was ‘we both get what we need.’ And since I couldn’t articulate or admit to what I needed, most of the time, he had the final say. I would just have to accept that. Somehow.

“Yeah, I understand,” I said. “When is the hearing scheduled?”

“Tuesday at five. I will tell you what happens as soon as it’s over, ‘kay?”

Nearly two more days of waiting? Now I almost wished he *hadn’t* told me. I nodded.

“In the meantime,” he said, “Quint replied to my email. We both think you going over there for dinner on a set day every week is a good idea, and I suggested Mondays, so it would be starting tomorrow. That work for you?”

I gulped. I hadn't expected it so soon. Of course, he probably wanted Quint to see me between now and the hearing, to make sure I wasn't freaking out about it too badly and to offer me a distraction.

"Yeah, that works."

"Cool. Also, he sent me the names of the two endos he was thinking of, and I gave him your email so he can send them to you, too. He said he could arrange for you to just meet with them as, like, an interview, no exam or anything, to see how you get along. So you guys can work out the details of that tomorrow and let me know."

I nodded and shifted in my chair to bring one knee up to my chest. Seeing another endo was the last thing I wanted, but I knew I'd have to sooner or later.

"There's one other thing I had to tell you. Platt's acting all Platt-like again, and I can't figure out what's going on with him. I thought you might be able to." He explained the other plebe's reaction to the fry. I listened, frowning. It sounded like he was taking Zain's trouble as personally as I was. Shaking his head, Zain said, "It's weird. He seems to trust Myrick, so why would he want to get him in trouble? And Cameron's never been anything but nice to him, that I know of."

I wasn't sure, either. "Maybe something happened that you don't know about. Or... you said he looked worried about you? Maybe he's just feeling protective. Especially if you're his first friend."

"It really came across as more focused on Cameron and Myrick, though. Maybe something *did* happen with them. I should try to ask him."

"Yeah. Also, see if you can observe how he acts around them, and let me know."

"Will do. The other thing I thought was, maybe you could talk to him. About that, and about being a sub."

Sometimes I think he has too much faith in me. My only conversation with Platt regarding submission hadn't ended well.

He must have seen my doubts, because he said, "It would seem less threatening coming from another sub, instead of me. And he did open up to you about it a little bit."

"I thought you said he decided not to be one anymore?"

"Yeah, he's still acting like he's not interested, but I accidentally gave him that boner, so—"

"WHAT?"

“Oh!” He laughed. “I completely forgot to tell you! So, remember our debrief last Saturday, after that *amazing* scene on Friday? He overheard my instructions to you at the end. I didn’t realize he was standing outside the door until I hung up, and when I opened it, he’d pitched a tent in his pants and was red as hell. Poor kid.”

My own face when pink, too, thinking about someone overhearing even just Zain’s side of that particular conversation. It did offer an insight into Platt, though. “Do you think he has a crush on you?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t think it was *me* in particular, just my, y’know, powerful...” He waved a hand vaguely. “Domliness.”

I rolled my eyes. Was it just that, though? It would also explain him being so overprotective he wanted to blackmail someone. I wouldn’t blame him — liking Zain is as easy and inevitable as the changing of the seasons, and it was obvious to me that Platt had bisexual tendencies, if not more — but I wanted to know. “Yeah, I think me talking to him would be good.”

“Okay, I’ll get you his personal email. Something like this should not go through the school’s servers. I’m also going to tell Quint about the hearing and everything. I wanted you to know first.”

That was a small comfort. At least I wasn’t the *last* person he told.

Dear Seb,

Attached are the names and profiles of the endocrinologists I mentioned to you and Zain. I can arrange for you to meet them both, and if neither suits you, they can recommend others. I have known them several years through my hospital, and can vouch that they are knowledgeable and excellent at listening to their patients’ needs. I’m sure anyone they directed you to would be, as well.

I’d also like to invite you to have dinner with Theo and I tonight, if you don’t have other plans already. Would six o’clock work for you? Please let me know.

*Kind regards,
Quint*

I wrote back that six would be fine, ignoring the way my stomach flipped over. *You aren’t hiding anything from Zain, so Quint won’t have a reason to be Tippy*, I reminded myself. It didn’t help much.

The dinner was in the back of my mind, along with the hearing, all through my classes.

After the last one let out, I walked to their apartment building, and found Theo waiting for me in the lobby with Jagger on a leash next to him. He opened the door to let me in. "Hey! You're a few minutes early."

"Hi," I said. "Yeah, I tend to do that, sorry."

Laughing, he said, "It's not a problem. Quint will love that about you. It drives him nuts that I'm always fashionably late. Well, not *always*, not since he started, um, helping me with it."

The way he could casually hint at things like that amazed me. I wasn't sure how to respond, so I crouched to rub Jagger behind the ears. "Did I interrupt you taking him out?"

"Nah, he just wanted to come down to meet you with me. C'mon, dinner's almost ready. It was my turn to cook tonight, but I promise it's edible."

When we got into the privacy of the elevator, he leaned back against the wall, with both his hands on the grab rail, and said, "So, Quint told me about the arrangement between you two."

"You don't mind, do you?" I asked. "Because if you do—"

"No, not at all! In fact, I've been kinda hoping he'd take you under his wing. I don't like you being alone here."

"Yeah. Neither did Zain. The whole thing was his idea."

He looked away from me, at the floor numbers counting up on the display, and didn't reply. A second later, the doors opened. I followed him around the corner to the apartment.

Quint was standing in the kitchen, taking dishes down from a cupboard. He smiled as we came in. "Hello, Seb."

"*Bonsoir*," I replied, concentrating very hard on removing my sandals so I had an excuse not to meet his eyes.

"You don't have to be so nervous," Theo said, unclipping Jagger's leash next to me. "He doesn't bite, y'know. Well, he does, but—"

"Theo," Quint cut him off, and the younger man somehow managed to look both innocent and mischievous.

"What? I'm just trying to put him at ease."

Quint turned to me. “Inappropriate comments aside, he does have a good point. You don’t need to be anxious around me just because I’m a Top and you’re a Brat. As far as I’m concerned, we’re friends first, and this arrangement doesn’t change that. Did you have any questions for me?”

I shook my head. I wanted to ask exactly how that dynamic would work, but I didn’t know how to phrase it.

“Alright. Let me know if you think of any.” He picked up a cookbook from the counter and held it out. “Would you like to see the recipe Theo used tonight?”

It was the same book he’d used to make the waffles, with the carb count per serving listed. I wondered if he had told Theo to use it, and why. “Thanks,” I said, taking it from him.

“It’s a pizza frittata,” Theo said. “Which gets by the pizza-only-once-a-month rule by the hair of its nose, so we could have it next week, too, if you like it.”

“We could not, since next week will be my turn to cook,” Quint told him, smiling.

“But Seb should get to pick, as the guest!”

They both looked at me.

“Um. I’m sure I’ll like whatever you cook,” I said, and Theo groaned.

“Noooo, you were supposed to say pizza and ice cream.”

A giggle escaped me. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Next time.”

With a shake of his head, Quint said, “Both of you wash your hands, please.”

Theo and I took turns at the sink while he plated the meal and carried it to the table. We sat down, Quint at the head and the two of us facing each other on either side of him. I hung my bag on the back of my chair. Then, without thinking, I took my test kit out and opened it. As I pressed the lancing device against the side of my pinky finger, I noticed Theo watching me.

“Oh,” he said. “That’s— that’s a needle, huh?”

Merde. I hadn’t even asked if they minded me testing right in front of them. I held my hand so the blood was hidden, being careful not to drip on the table.

“That’s a lancet, angel,” said Quint, “not a needle.”

“Um, yeah,” I said. “The needle is on my pen.” I pointed to it. The needle itself wasn’t visible, thanks to the safety cap, but Theo went a shade paler under his stubble.

“Ah. Okay. I’ll just... be over here while you do that.” He scooted his chair away from the table several inches. “I have a minor... thing with needles.”

Oh. I felt awful. Injections are such an everyday part of my life, I forget other people can have phobias of them. Dropping the lancet back into my kit and closing it, I said, “Sorry. I’ll go in the bathroom.”

Theo shook his head. “No, you don’t have to—”

At the same time, I said, “I don’t mind—”

Quint interrupted us both, saying, “There’s no need for you to leave the table.”

I was already standing, trying not to bleed on anything from one hand while I clumsily picked up my kit with the other. I nearly dropped it as I turned and moved towards the hallway. “It’s fine.”

“Seb,” said Quint. “Sit down, please.”

Stopping, I looked over my shoulder. His face matched his voice: calm and pleasant.

“I don’t want anyone to be uncomfortable,” I said, taking a cautious step.

Very deliberately, with no movement wasted, he put his fork and knife on his placemat, parallel to his plate, and clasped his hands together. “Theo is alright,” he said. “You are not going to keep testing and giving yourself injections in the bathroom. Now.” He nodded at my chair. “Sit down, please.”

He still didn’t seem upset. Just not at all willing to debate it any further.

I looked to Theo, and he held up both palms with a small smile. “Really, I’m good. I’ve had to get a lot better about needles since I started volunteering in the hospital. Also, I’d probably listen to Quint right now, if I were you. Or I, y’know, *wouldn’t*, and I’d wind up swatted.”

He couldn’t swat me. I wasn’t sure if Theo knew that or not, but I also wasn’t interested in getting into the gritty details of the arrangement. With one last glance at the older man, I sat.

Well, now I know where the friend turns into the Top, I thought. It was odd how a completely different manner from Zain's could evoke the exact same reaction in me. I felt myself settle down, even as my cheeks went pink and my gaze fixed on my kit.

Quint put his hand on my shoulder, squeezed briefly, and let go. "What classes did you have today?"

"Um." I picked up the meter and finally started my test, aware that he and Theo were both watching me. When I risked a glance at them, though, I saw their eyes were on my face, not my hands. "I had a foundation class in color, and one called Current Issues in Biology."

"Ugh, I *hated* Bio," Theo said. "I almost had to take it twice, too."

He didn't seem freaked out now. I relaxed and let myself be pulled into conversation as I administered the shot.

When we finished dinner, Quint rose first. Standing as well, I started to pick up my plate to carry it to the kitchen, and he took it from me. "Thank you, Seb, I've got it."

"He who cooks doesn't clean," said Theo, pushing his chair back from the table, "so Quint gets to do the dishes tonight."

"I didn't cook, though," I said, and Theo rolled his eyes.

"You're the *guest*, so you don't clean *or* cook. C'mon, I want to show you something." He got up and started towards the hallway.

I looked from the dirty dishes still on the table to his retreating back. My mother's lessons about politeness and my own desire not to be a nuisance both kept me from following him. "Are you sure?" I asked Quint. "I could just help carry them."

"I can take them in one trip, but thank you anyway," he said. To prove his words, he was already stacking the plates in his hand. "Go on."

With one last pang of conscience, I turned away. Theo poked his head out of the doorway on the left at the beginning of the hall and said, "C'mon, hurry!"

It was the same room I'd been in for my call to Zain. The desk showed more signs of use than the twin bed on the opposite side, though both were impeccably tidy.

Theo pointed at the wall above the desk. "We hung your drawing in here."

I hadn't noticed it before. It was neat to see it in its final home. I don't often know what happens to the pieces I sell after they're gone.

"It's perfect," I said, "but why did I have to hurry?"

He stuck his head into the hallway again, for just a split second, and then shut the door between us and the rest of the apartment. Sitting on the edge of the bed with a little bounce, he grinned at me. "You didn't for that," he said. "I just wanted to get you out of earshot of Quint while he's distracted with cleaning. How've you been? Since, y'know, Saturday?"

I blushed. So much had happened since then, I'd forgotten that the last time he'd seen me hadn't been my finest hour. But why all the secrecy around asking me about it? Had Quint somehow accidentally let slip about Zain's visit, and told him not to mention it? I didn't want Theo knowing my Top felt the need to make a special four-hour trip just to deliver a spanking. It was too embarrassing.

Plus, I knew I was being paranoid, but the fewer people who were aware of Zain leaving Annapolis, the better.

"It's alright," he said, when I didn't answer. "Last Monday, I was a lot worse off than you were. Remember how I said I had a band?"

I nodded.

"It broke up a few weeks back. The drummer used to be a good friend of mine, but he wanted to tour nationally and do all this other stuff I didn't think we needed or were ready for, and we fought about it a lot over the past several months, until it finally came to a head. He told me he was leaving, and then the other two said they were, as well, and... it was hard." He looked down at his hands for a moment.

That sounded terrible. I wanted to express my sympathy, but he continued before I could think of something to say.

"Mitch — that's my former friend — and I were exchanging emails. They started out just me trying to tie up some loose ends, and maybe see if I could salvage our relationship. Then, about a week ago, they got nasty. Like, *really* nasty, from both of us. I was, um, sneaking in here to use the computer after bedtime. And I was taking out my feelings on Quint, too, which I hate. He's been so wonderful and supportive through all this; he doesn't deserve that.

"So, Monday night, I wanted to blow off some steam. I went out to a karaoke bar with my friend Zeggy, and I decided to get drunk. That's— that's a big deal with Quint and me, for reasons I won't get into, but basically, I'm not allowed to get drunk ever, and I'm not allowed to have

alcohol without him there. Zeg knows both of those things, and she called him and told him he needed to come get me.”

“She knows about...?” I trailed off awkwardly.

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s not in a discipline relationship herself, but she’s totally supportive of it. I haven’t told her about you or anything, don’t worry. She’ll probably guess, though, if she meets you. Shrinks are spooky like that.

“Anyway, Quint walked in while I was up on stage, singing my own version of ‘So What’ by Pink — you know, the song that goes ‘so what, I’m still a rockstar, I got my rock moves, and I don’t need you’? I saw him looming in the middle of the room when I was halfway through. You ever get that mood where you know you’re in deep shit already, so you might as well dive?”

Blinking a couple of times, I slowly shook my head.

Theo laughed. “Yeah, you do kinda seem too well-behaved for that. Well, I get it, and I got it that night. Stood up there and finished singing, straight at him, and I think I even threw in an extra repetition of the line ‘I wanna get in trouble, I wanna start a fight,’ just, y’know, in case I was being too *subtle*.”

I bit my lip to keep from smiling, and he winked at me.

“It starts to blur at that point, but I know Quint helped me get off the stage without falling, and he had a cab waiting outside for us. When he told you I was sick, he wasn’t lying, exactly, because I remember puking on the street at some point.

“The worst part, though? He refused to even start to discuss it until I wasn’t hungover anymore, which took most of Tuesday. I *hated* waiting that long. I can’t imagine what it would’ve been like if he was hundreds of miles away and I could only see him on Skype. So!” He clapped both hands on his knees, like he was dismissing all of that as in the past. “How’ve you been?”

Then he didn’t know. Relieved, I said, “Oh, I’m good now. Zain and I talked about everything, and we set up this new arrangement with Quint.” I hesitated, glancing at the closed door. “Can you... um, can you tell me more about him?”

Theo moved farther onto the bed, crossing his legs, and patted the knitted gray comforter next to him. I sat down on the edge of it. “What do you want to know?” he asked.

I tried to think of something specific. My mind was blank, though. “Just what sort of Top is he, I guess?”

“Hmm.” He leaned back on his hands and looked up towards the ceiling. “It’s hard for me to say, because I’ve never had anyone to really compare him to, you know? I’d say he’s firm, yet fair. He’s also incredibly patient and hard to annoy. Sometimes he’s so placid, I accuse him of being an android sent from outer space to observe human customs.” He smiled sideways at me and added, “Sometimes he even plays along and talks about his home planet and stuff. He’s *such* a nerd.”

I smiled back. It sounded like I had been right about Quint not raising his voice. I was glad for that, yet it also brought up more questions. Earlier, when he’d ordered me to sit down, I was caught off guard by the steel hidden in that equable tone. “Does he get more... serene as, um... as...”

“Ah! You’re fishing for the *warning* signs,” Theo said, with a knowing look. I blushed again, and he laughed. “It’s okay. No, the ‘keep calm and carry on’ thing is just who he is. What you have to pay attention to is the politeness. Not that he’s *ever* rude, but when he gets super polite, that’s when you’d better watch your step. And if I’ve really screwed up big, his voice goes all gentle and puzzled, and it feels like someone dumped a bucket of ice down my spine. I can’t even imitate it, but trust me, you will know what I mean if you do provoke it.” He shivered dramatically. “I’d say the most common warning sign is just him calling me ‘Theodore,’ though. And don’t worry, he gives you plenty of notice when you’re coming up to the line you don’t want to cross, and if you *do* cross it, he makes sure everyone’s clear on how and why before he does anything. He’s a big fan of talking stuff over first.”

Despite his reassuring tone, that made anxiety roil in my stomach. I prefer Zain’s ‘spank first, ask questions later’ approach. Often, I don’t know the answer to the questions, or I can’t verbalize them, until I’ve processed some emotions over his knee.

There was a light knock on the door, and then it opened and Quint stepped into the room, Jagger following behind. The dog sat down in front of me. Absentmindedly, I started petting him. Quint, meanwhile, had raised one eyebrow at his husband. “You aren’t being nosy, are you?”

“I asked him how he was doing! I’m his friend,” said Theo, his shoulders coming up around his ears. “Friends are allowed to ask that!”

The eyebrow didn’t go back down. “Seb, if you get uncomfortable in any way with Theo’s questions, tell him to stop, or tell me, okay?”

Quickly, I said, “I don’t mind.”

“I’m not asking him nosy questions, I swear,” Theo said. “We’re having Brat-talk.”

At that, Quint glanced between us. “Oh? Should my ears have been burning just now?”

Theo grinned. "Well, you're the doctor, but that doesn't seem healthy to me."

"Hmm," said Quint. "In any case, angel, would you take Jagger for his walk tonight, please? I need to speak with Seb privately for a few minutes."

My stomach jerked as Jagger, apparently recognizing the word 'walk,' abandoned my ear-rubs to bound out the door. Theo sighed. To me, he said, "See, now's the part where *he* gets to ask you nosy questions. Total double standard."

"Theodore."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm going," he huffed as he slid off the bed and walked past Quint. The Top followed him into the hall. I heard him say something about attitude in a low voice, and then Theo faintly responding, "Yes, sir."

There was another moment of quiet before Quint came back in. He pulled the swivel chair away from the desk, spun it to face me, and sat down, resting his elbows on his knees.

I found it a lot easier to look at them than at his eyes.

"Relax, Seb, you aren't in any trouble," he said. "I simply wanted to talk to you about a couple of things. And despite what Theo claims, there's no double standard here. If you're uncomfortable with my questions, you can tell me to stop as well."

"But then you'd tell Zain, right?" I asked, still looking down.

"If you didn't want to tell him yourself, then yes," he said. "Are you alright with that?"

I swallowed and nodded.

"Okay. Speaking of double standards, Zain explained to me about this hearing he has tomorrow, and he also mentioned you were upset he'd kept the issue from you for a day. How are you feeling about that?"

No dancing around it, then. He cut straight to the chase, just like Zain. The best I could manage for an answer was a shrug.

"I understand this is difficult," Quint said, "but try to give me some eye contact and a verbal response, please."

I glanced up. "*Je ne sais pas.*"

He was quiet, and for a moment, I was almost certain I could hear my own heartbeat. It stuttered to a halt when he said, “I think you do know, Sébastien. If you feel like you can’t tell me, please say that. I do not appreciate being lied to.”

My face went burning hot. I wanted to crawl under the bed and never come out. Suddenly, Quint was sitting beside me with his arm around my shoulders, holding me fast.

“It’s alright,” he said. “I don’t believe you meant to, and I’m not angry with you. If you’d like, we can call Zain. It’s his free period now, right?”

Nodding, I said, “But I don’t want to.”

“Okay. Can you tell me why?”

I took a deep inhale and released it again, rubbing my sweaty palms over my jeans. “Because I’m mad at him,” I admitted, barely audible.

Quint didn’t ask me to repeat myself, so I figured he heard me. He also didn’t say anything, though. The silence stretched on, waiting, until I found myself speaking again.

“I know it wasn’t a double standard, but I still think he should have told me sooner.”

“Did he explain why he kept it from you?”

“He thought I couldn’t handle the st–stress,” I said, my voice breaking. That, I realized, was what hurt the most — the idea of Zain seeing me as poor little Sebby.

Next to me, Quint tilted his head down to frown into my eyes. “That isn’t what he told me. He said he wanted to spare you from days of waiting and anxiety. He didn’t say anything about you not being able to handle it. If he truly thought that, why would he have told you before the hearing at all?”

It was a good question. “He must’ve changed his mind,” I said. “Still, his first thought was that I couldn’t handle it.”

“No, it wasn’t, I can almost guarantee you.”

I turned to look at him, trying to think of a polite way to phrase ‘how would you know?’

“Let me give you a Top’s perspective,” he said, smiling a little. “I know, as a Top, that Zain is feeling like he didn’t do enough to prevent Saturday from happening.”

Guilt stabbed through me. I had accused him of as much, in my dorm room, and no matter how sincerely I apologized, it had to wound him.

"I also know," Quint went on, "my own natural reaction to a situation like that is to do everything in my power to make sure it doesn't happen again. That's the idea behind this whole arrangement, isn't it?" He waited for me to nod before continuing. "So when he was caught, he was not thinking about what you could or couldn't handle. He was thinking that you shouldn't *have* to handle it, along with everything else you had gone through. Does that make sense?"

In other words, he was, like normal, being protective because of who *he* is, not who I am. What had made me forget?

I nodded once more.

"Good," said Quint. "You still need to talk to him about this, since it's been bothering you."

But we just sorted it all out!

My face contorted into one of my standard grimaces, and I slapped my hands up over it, mortified. "Sorry!" I said, muffled by my own palms. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to stick my tongue out at you, I swear!"

"It's alright," he said, and I thought I heard a hint of a chuckle in his voice. I lowered my hands enough to look at him over my fingertips.

"With Theo, though— I mean..." I didn't want to give away that I had overheard them in the hall.

He smiled again. "Theo has too much attitude for his own good at times. You, I think, don't have enough. Now, are you ready to call Zain?"

Reluctantly, I said, "Okay."

After signing into the computer, he gestured me to the desk chair and took another one from the corner next to the filing cabinet. Then he put it beside mine and sat down with his hand on my backrest while he watched me pull up Skype. Zain answered the call almost immediately.

"Babe! Quint! Great to see you both! 'Sup?"

"Is JJ there?" I asked. The other Marine wasn't behind him, but he could've been in the shower or something.

"Nope, choir practice," Zain replied. "Need me to put in my earbuds?"

“Yeah,” I said, and waited for him to do so before continuing. “Um. I have to talk to you about something.”

“Kay?”

Explaining it was difficult. Finding the words felt like trying to mix paint and not being able to create the exact shade I wanted. When I finally managed to convey what I’d thought his motivation for not telling me was, he instantly looked stricken.

“Oh, *habibi*, that’s not true at all.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s fine now, Quint helped me see it was just you being *you*, it’s fine.”

The corner of his lips twitched. “Me being me?” he asked. “You mean, like, handsome, dashing, charming—”

“And pigheadedly protective, yes,” I interrupted, rolling my eyes.

He laughed. “Oh, *right*. Yeah, that about sums me up. Well, thanks for telling me, babe, and thank you, Quint, for getting him to admit he was angry with me — I know how difficult that can be sometimes — and for getting him over it. The trial run of this dealio seemed to work out, yeah?”

I nodded, blushing.

To my right, Quint said, “Yes, I think it went rather well.”

“Did you arrange the endo interviews, too?” Zain asked.

I’d been waiting for Quint to bring it up, hoping he’d forget.

“That’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about, Seb. What is your schedule like this Friday? They’re both available to sit down with you that afternoon.”

If I claimed I was busy, Zain would know it wasn’t true. He had my classes memorized. He might not tell on me, yet even the possibility of Quint finding out I’d lied to him again was enough to make me say, “I’m free after two.”

“That would work, then. I’ll talk to them and get an exact time.”

“Babe, I’ve been thinking, I’d really like Quint to go with you when you meet the new doctors,” said Zain. “Not into the room with you, if you don’t want. He could hang in the waiting room. I’d just like someone to be there for you after. How does that sound?”

I was already shaking my head. “No, it’s too much to ask him.”

“Not at all,” Quint said. “I can reschedule a meeting and be there. The office is across the street from my hospital, so it’s not out of my way.”

Zain grinned. “Perfect! *Habibi*, what d’ya think?”

They were both looking at me. Part of me wanted to tell Zain I didn’t need a babysitter. The other part was remembering my appointments in Hawaii, having him there with me, and how it calmed my nerves.

“Okay.”

“Awesome,” said Zain.

At the same time, I heard the apartment door open and Jagger and Theo coming in. Quint quietly excused himself and went out to meet them.

“Well, my free period is almost up. I’ll talk to you tomorrow right after the hearing, ‘kay? I promise.”

I nodded. “*Je t’aime*.”

“Love you too. Bye!”

For someone in trouble, he was annoyingly cheerful. I sat a few seconds looking at the blank call window, worrying about what the next day would bring.³

³ The extra [Pillow Talk](#) goes here.

Chapter Fourteen

Platt seemed to be avoiding me, giving me no opportunity to ask him for his personal email or observe him with Cameron or Myrick. I didn't know what I'd done to get the kid uneasy. We'd been making good progress, hadn't we? I was frustrated with myself for not being able to figure it out.

That, along with getting Seb settled into his new arrangement with Quint, overpowered any small worries I had about my hearing. They hadn't notified me of additional evidence or witnesses, and I was planning to exercise my right to remain silent and let my written statement stand alone. If it was all Cameron had to go on, I would be fine.

I still didn't know why she'd called a hearing to begin with. JJ was right, it was excessive for the offense. The only thing I could think was that I'd ticked her off, somehow, with my refusal to answer her question. But she had never seemed vindictive before, and I'd even gotten the impression she liked me a little. It made no sense.

On Tuesday, I headed to the hearing room well in advance of the scheduled time. I wanted to get the lay of the land first, and to show I was taking this seriously.

I expected to be the first one there. As I walked down the passageway toward the open door, though, I heard voices coming from inside.

"Justine! Wherever he was, it might have nothing to do with Belcher, Gould, or Platt."

It was Myrick, sounding almost angry. Frowning, I stopped just outside the doorway, with my back against the bulkhead, and listened to Cameron reply, "You don't want to be *sure*? He's kept stuff from us before. They both have."

"Yes, and I warned them about that," Myrick said. "They agreed they would come to us if anything else happened."

They were definitely talking about Platt and me. I remembered Myrick's look of steel, that night in the judo practice gym, very well.

Cameron's voice had a note of pleading as she said, "If there's even a chance we could have proof against Gould—"

"I know," Myrick interrupted her, gentler.

"MO!"

I nearly jumped away from the door, putting one finger to my lips, although there was no way the two upperclassmen hadn't heard JJ's shout as he came around the corner. He was followed by Platt, Nakamura, Diaz, Stevens, Sullivan... my entire squad from Plebe Summer, in fact. I walked towards them, frowning again.

"What are you all doing here? It's the athletic reserve period. Nak, you're supposed to be at football practice, and the rest of you should be doing your club sports."

"We came to be character witnesses for you, Dad," Diaz said. "We're all willing to testify on your behalf." Some of the others nodded and chimed in with their agreement.

I held up a hand. "Wait. How did any of you know about this, other than JJ and Platt?"

"Platt told us," Nak said, giving his roommate a clap on the shoulder. "Said you got fried and needed help."

When I looked to the kid in surprise, he glared at me, like he was daring me to say something about it. I laughed under my breath.

"Guys," I said, addressing the whole group, "I'm touched, I truly am, by your support. Thank you all. But when I waived my right to a hearing, I also waived the right to character witnesses, and I would've needed to inform them beforehand if I was planning to call anyone, anyway."

From behind the squad, our company Conduct Officer, another upperclassman, appeared. "Mohyeldin is right," he said, "and this hearing is not open to observers. Report to your normal athletic activities, before I fry every one of you."

Their faces fell, but they started to leave as he went into the hearing room. At the same time, Myrick came out of it, met my eyes briefly, and stood next to the door where I had been earlier. That gave me an idea.

"Hey, actually there is a way you can help me," I said, turning back to my scattered squadmates. "Anyone have a piece of paper and something to write with?"

Sullivan produced a pen and notebook from her backpack. I opened it to a blank sheet, scribbled a few sentences in the shorthand I'd learned over the summer from Myrick's book, and tore it out before giving her things back.

"Thanks. Now all of you go. I don't want you getting in trouble."

Most of them left, some with grudging mutters of 'yes, Dad,' but Platt stayed where he was, his arms crossed over his chest. I rolled my eyes in amusement.

“Kid—”

“I’ll take care of him,” Myrick said, quietly, coming up next to me. “Go in, or you’ll be late.”

I glanced from him to Platt, and then handed Myrick the paper. He looked down at it, his dark brows coming together while his eyes flicked over the marks. I left him reading and Platt scowling as I walked away.

The hearing was being held in an unused classroom. Cameron and the Conduct Officer were both sitting behind a table at the front, facing me. I came to attention just inside the door, saying, “Fourth-class Midshipman Mohyeldin reporting for adjudication, ma’am.”

She pointed to one of the desks in the front row. “Sit down, Mohyeldin.”

I followed the order. As I took my seat, her gaze went behind me, to the open door, and she stood.

“Remain there,” she said, walking past me. I was still at attention, so I couldn’t turn my head to see, yet I was willing to bet Myrick had called her out into the passageway. Would he read to her exactly what I had written?

I can’t tell you what happened Saturday. It was about my fiancé, not Platt. I give you my word I will inform you of anything Gould or Belcher do. You could have just asked, you know.

The last sentence was a bit risky, bordering on disrespect, but I was annoyed at them both. They made me get Seb all worried because they couldn’t *trust* me? I only hoped they did now.

A minute later, Cameron returned. She sat next to the Conduct Officer and stared me down for a few seconds. I looked back steadily.

Finally, she said, “Mohyeldin, we have not found any further evidence against you. Would you like to modify or add to your written statement as it was submitted on the Form-2?”

Not ‘is your statement honest?’ I noticed. Aloud, I said, “No, ma’am.”

“Then I accept your plea of guilty. Would you like to present extenuating and mitigating circumstances to be considered prior to my awarding punishment?”

“No, ma’am.”

She nodded. “I award you five demerits and three hours of Extra Duty, to be completed this coming Saturday at 1200 hours. You will report to the Main Office at that time, where your duty station will be assigned. Do you fully understand the punishment?”

Yep, I understood. It was only a tiny bit more than a slap on the wrist. Missing three hours of liberty would kind of suck, but I'd deal with it. "Yes, ma'am," I said.

The Conduct Officer looked taken aback, and I couldn't really blame him. He had to be wondering why she'd bothered to call a hearing at all. She was his superior, though, so he didn't question it when Cameron turned to him and said, "Akers, update the Form-2 to reflect the results of the adjudication."

"Aye, ma'am," he replied.

"Mohyeldin, you're dismissed."

I said, "Thank you, ma'am," and left. The entire thing took less than five minutes. I walked into the passageway with my mind on calling Seb, and found Myrick standing by the door again. He gave me an impassive nod. Glancing around, I asked, "Where's Platt?"

"I sent him to Judo Club, where he should have been," said Myrick. "He went that way."

"Thank you, sir," I said, before taking the route he'd indicated, around the corner to the right. I wanted to tell Seb about the hearing as soon as possible, but I couldn't afford to miss talking to the kid. As I turned, I spotted him at the far end of the passageway. I broke into a jog to catch up. "Platt!"

He looked over his shoulder and slowed to a stop.

"Hey," I said, smiling as I joined him. "I got five demerits and some Extra Duty. Thank you again for bringing the squad. That was really sweet of you."

Glaring, he said, "It was a fucking stupid idea. Don't pretend it wasn't."

If Seb had said that, I would have swatted him. I rubbed my palm instead and asked, "Have I done something to make you mad at me?"

"No." His skin went faintly pink.

"Well, that's good," I said, cheerfully. "What about Myrick and Cameron?"

At that, his blush deepened to a dusky red, and he looked away and started walking again. "What about them?"

"Did they make you mad?"

He scowled at the deck. “Why do you care what I think of them, anyway?”

Shrugging, I said, “Just curious. Myrick was helping you out with judo and everything. I kind of thought—”

“Don’t,” he spat. “Whatever you were thinking, don’t. They’re always checking up on me, wanting to know if Gould has been bothering me, or if I’ve seen Belcher. I don’t need their fucking protection.”

Always checking up on him? Both of them?

I put that away for later and casually stuck my hands in my pockets. “Y’know, you should really talk to my fiancé more. You two would totally bond over your don’t-need-no-help-from-nobody convictions. What’s your personal email? I’ll give it to him.”

“*What?*” he asked, stopping to stare at me suspiciously.

I put on my most innocent expression. “What?”

“Why would I want to email your fiancé?”

“Like I said, you’d bond.” I started walking again, so he had to follow me to keep up. “You’ve got a lot in common, not just the independent streak.” I didn’t mean submission, necessarily, but from the way his flush spread down his neck, he was probably thinking of it. “Plus,” I added, pulling out my trump card, “you never did say sorry for tearing that mandala I gave you into pieces.”

He shot me a guilty little look from the corner of his eye. “That was... I apologize, that was wrong of me.”

“Thanks, I forgive you,” I said, easily. “I meant to Seb, though. He colored it, not me.”

I watched him think it over. Eventually, the moral compass I knew he had — even if it didn’t point exactly north — won out over the reluctance. “Okay,” he said. “Give me his email address. I’ll write to him tonight.”

Close enough, I figured. “It’s sebmckennacrews@gmail.com,” I told him, and then spelled it out as he typed it into his phone. “I’ll let him know to be expecting your email.”

He nodded.

“Oh, also,” I said, “The punishment was assigned for this Saturday, so you and JJ will have to either go play Call of Duty without me, or wait for me to be done before we head over. I’ll talk to him and see what works for his sponsor parents.”

“Fine,” he said, turning abruptly to a door on the left. “I have to go to judo.”

“Kay, have fun!” I called after him. He didn’t answer, but he waved over his shoulder, so that was something. As the door swung shut behind him, I started running back towards my room, and Seb.

It took him longer to answer the Skype call than I expected. I thought he’d be glued to his computer waiting for it to come in. When he did pick up, he didn’t look as worried as I’d anticipated, either. Somehow, I imagined it wasn’t because my reassurances had worked that well.

“Hey, babe!” I said, keeping my voice cheerful even as I studied him carefully. “Five demerits and three hours of Extra Duty this Saturday, both of which are nothing at all serious. See, I told you, didn’t I?”

“That’s... that’s good,” he said, slowly, and then smiled, but it was an odd, loopy smile. I frowned. He didn’t look pale, and he wasn’t shaking, from what I could tell. For a second, he leaned out of view, before holding a colored mandala up to the camera. “Look!” he said. “Isn’t it the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

“It’s very pretty,” I agreed. “Babe, can you do a test for me? I think you might be low.”

“No, I’m not,” he said, frowning himself now.

“Are you sure?” I asked. I wasn’t sure, either. If it *was* a low, it had hit him unlike any other I’d seen.

“Yeah,” he said, and when I simply looked at him, he added, still slow, like he was searching for each word, “I was in a studio earlier working on something and I kinda lost track of time, but I came back and I ate... and I’m *good* now.”

“Okay. What were you at before you ate, and what did you eat?” I asked. If it had been a severe low, and he wasn’t thinking clearly to begin with, he might not have had enough.

He lowered his head and looked up at me through his eyelashes. “Ummmm... mid-50s, maybe? And... food?”

My lips twitched. The first part of that probably meant he hadn't bothered to test before eating, which was fine under certain circumstances, if he didn't have easy access to his kit or he was shaking too bad to do it, but the second part? Obvious non-answer.

"Seb. Brat. What food?"

With wide eyes, he said, "Okay, but I'm going to replace it!"

"Replace what?" I asked, patiently.

All in one breath, he said, "There was a plate of cookies on the counter, and I was so *hungry*, and the microwave was taking forever to heat up my frozen dinner, and I only had one, I swear, and I will tell my roommates I took one, too."

A suspicion crept into the corner of my mind. "A plate of cookies? Did they look homemade?"

"...Yeah?"

I pressed the side of my fist to my mouth before pointedly asking, "Homemade by your three pothead roommates?"

Seb looked utterly confused for a moment, and then he dropped his forehead onto his desk with a *thunk* that made me wince. "Oh *mes dieux*, I'm stoned."

Biting my lip to keep from laughing, I said, "Yep, that's my guess."

"But I don't *wanna* be stoned," he whined, still into his desk.

"Well, I think it's too late to stop it," I said, not without sympathy. He's always been dead set against using mind-altering recreational substances of any kind. "Babe, I want you to call Keegan right now and put it on speaker," I told him. I couldn't help feeling some relief that it wasn't his blood sugars, but I needed to make sure he was in no other danger. "She's the expert here, not me."

"Yeah, okay." He lifted his head up and pulled his phone from his pants pocket. I watched him tap the screen a couple of times, and then heard it ringing before his sister picked up.

"Bro! How goes it?" she asked.

He looked from the phone to me, pleadingly.

“Kee?” I said. “It’s Zain. Seb’s here, too. Listen, he ate a cookie off a plate that his roommates just left lying out, and we think it had marijuana in it, because he’s acting stoned. What do we do now?”

She was silent for a couple of seconds, yet when she spoke, she sounded matter-of-fact. “Was it only pot? Are you sure?”

“No,” I said, concerned. “Babe, are any of your roommates home?”

Seb nodded.

“Go get one,” I said, and when the pleading expression came back, intensified by about a thousand, I tilted my head and gave him an inquisitive look and a small smile.

He went, taking the phone.

About half a minute later, he reappeared in view, with one of the roommates I’d met on my visit standing next to him. “Calvin, this is Zain.”

“Oh, hey, dude!” Calvin said. “I remember you!”

“Amazing,” I said. “Listen, Seb’s sister Keegan is on the phone. She’s going to ask you some questions, and you’re going to keep in mind that I am a fully-trained Marine, and answer them truthfully. Got it?”

“Zain!” Seb squeaked.

“Hush, *habibi*,” I told him. “Got it, Calvin?”

He looked a tad bit nervous, which was good. “Uh... yeah?”

“Excellent. Kee, what do you need to know?”

“Well, mainly, how’d you make the cookies?” Keegan asked.

“Oh,” Calvin said, “we put weed in ‘em.”

I could hear Keegan’s sigh even over the two connections of the phone and Skype. “Yes, but what kind of weed? Where did you get it? Was it laced with anything? Did you smoke any? How potent was it?”

Calvin blinked a couple of times at that onslaught of questioning. I waited, aware that Seb had now completely lost his earlier chill and was fidgeting anxiously. Finally, the roommate said, “It

was like, high-quality shit Mark got from one of his connects. I don't know who, exactly, but we've used the same dude before, and it didn't have anything in it then?"

"Oh, for— This. This is why we need legalization," Keegan said, exasperated. "How did you put it in the cookies? And exactly how much did you use, for how many cookies?"

"Mark got five grams for this party we're having, and we put it in a slow-cooker with a couple sticks of butter for a few hours, and then used that to make two dozen cookies," he said. "Oh, hey, we also smoked some, and it felt like just a weed-high. That help?"

"Yes, thank you, you may go," Keegan said.

With one last, worried glance at me, Calvin left. After he shut the door behind him, I asked, "So what's the verdict, Kee?"

"Well," she said, "I don't know how much you trust your roommates, bro, but I'd say it most likely was just weed, which is the good news. The bad news is, it was a *lot* of weed. That cookie should've been split between two — or probably three — people to get a reasonable dose for a regular user."

"Did I overdose?" Seb asked, dropping into his desk chair with his eyebrows all scrunched up.

"No, nothing like that," she said quickly. "It's impossible to overdose on marijuana. But you, my skinny little Sebby, are in for a *trip*, and not a pleasant one."

"And there's nothing we can do to help?" I asked.

"Fraid not," she said. "If he's already started feeling the effects, it's moved into his intestines now, and all you can do is wait for it to wear off. The best thing in the meantime would be to go somewhere you feel safe and comfortable, watch something really relaxing on TV, and try to sleep. Your heart is going to be beating fast, and you might see or hear or think strange, scary things. You might even be convinced that you're dying. You aren't, and it will pass. The worst of it should be over by morning."

As she spoke, Seb had the oddest expression on his face — kind of glassy, but also fearful, like he wasn't paying attention to her and whatever he *was* focused on terrified him. I wasn't sure how much of her advice he'd actually taken in. I only wished I could be by his side through the night ahead.

"Okay," I said. "Thanks, Kee. Bye."

"Bye. Call me if you need anything, Sebby. Love you."

Seb didn't answer her. A moment later, he set the phone down on the desk. "She's gone. Z, I don't wanna do this."

"I know, *habibi*, I'd stop it if I could. I'm going to text Quint and explain what happened. Pack an overnight bag, and put your Joy of Painting DVDs in it, too."

"Why— Zain!"

I looked up from the message I was composing on my phone, right into the webcam, and let him see how serious I was. "Seb, I want you somewhere safe and under medical supervision. I don't trust your roommates, and we can't be sure that was only pot. Also, you're not going to be thinking clearly enough to monitor your glucose levels. You're going to Quint and Theo's, or you're going to a hospital. Your choice."

"...Quint and Theo's."

"Good choice. Go on and pack while I fill him in."

It took awhile to get both done. Quint didn't answer immediately — when he did, he apologized for the delay, saying he'd been underground on the subway — and Seb kept stopping in the middle of packing his bag to stare in amazement at the mandalas taped to his wall.

Well, it's an improvement from 'scared', I thought, half-amused, as I coaxed him into moving again.

"They're so *beautiful*," he said. "The most beautiful things in the world."

"Nope, they're not as gorgeous as you," I said. My phone chimed, and I read the message. "Oh, good, Quint's right downstairs. Do you have everything? Grab The Joy of Painting, too, remember."

That took him another minute to find and put in his bag, and he still hadn't managed to get pajamas or a toothbrush. I figured Quint and Theo would have those, though.

"Okay, I'm gonna call you," I said, dialing him on my phone.

I heard his ringtone for me start to play, yet he didn't pick up, instead looking in confusion from me on the screen to his phone.

"Do you wanna maybe answer that, babe?" I suggested, smiling.

"But... you're already talking to me. Is there two of you?" he asked, and I lost it.

Through my laughter, I said, “*Habibi*, it’s just me. Answer the phone, okay?”

Hesitantly, he picked it up and brought it to his ear.

“Hi,” I said, giving him a little wave on the webcam. “Just me. I’m gonna hang up Skype now, so you won’t see me anymore, but you’ll hear me still. Understand?”

He nodded.

I ended the video call and turned away from my computer, getting to my feet to pace. “Okay, now I need you to take your bag and go downstairs to meet Quint. Got it?” There was only silence, and I frowned, looking at the screen to make sure he was still connected, before I realized. “Babe, you can’t see me and I can’t see you now. I need you to say yes or no.”

“Oh! Yes!” he said. “I—” He broke off, giggling. “I’m sorry, Z, this is... really weird.”

I smiled. “It’s okay. You going downstairs?”

“Yes,” he replied, decisively. “I’m taking the elevator.”

“That’s my boy,” I praised. “Quint said he’s right out front waiting, and I’m gonna stay on the phone with you as long as I can.” Chow calls and evening meal formation were coming up, but I could talk to him until then.

“Kay. There’s Quint.” A few moments later, he said, “Hi, Quint. Zain’s on the phone,” and then started giggling once more.

I don’t know what Quint must’ve thought as they walked down to his building. I babbled to Seb about no subject in particular, the way I do to just ground him a little, while he laughed at almost everything. Eventually, I heard a change in the ambient background noise.

“We’re getting into Quint’s elevator now,” Seb said. “Oh. I feel dizzy. I don’t like this.”

“It’s alright, babe, you’re almost there,” I soothed.

From farther away, I heard Quint’s voice saying, “Stay with me, Seb, it’s only around the corner.”

“Just a little longer,” I said. “Then you can lay down.”

He didn’t reply, and the next thing I heard was another voice — Theo’s, I figured. “Seb! Hey, c’mon in. Don’t worry, you’ll be fine.”

Pacing still, I looked at my watch. I'd have to leave in a few minutes if I didn't want to wind up right back in trouble. "Babe?" I asked. "Hand the phone to Quint a sec, 'kay?"

I heard what might have been an affirmative, followed by Quint saying, "Hello, Zain."

"Hi," I said. "Thank you. I know this isn't what you signed up for."

"Helping both of you is exactly what I signed up for," he replied.

"Yeah, but I don't imagine you had *this* in mind."

"Well, no, not exactly," he admitted. "I understand what happened, though, and why you'd want someone with him."

I nodded. "Yeah, especially since I can't stay on the phone. He seems just kinda giggly and out of it at the moment. From what his sister said, it's going to get a whole lot worse. If he needs me, or something happens, or you need to ask a question, you can call me any time, and I'll answer or call back as soon as I can."

"Alright," he said. "I actually — angel, would you please get Seb settled on the couch with a glass of water? Thank you." The noise of the other two faded. "Sorry," he said to me. "I'm in the guest room now. I actually did have a question I've been meaning to ask you, if you have time."

I glanced at my watch again. "Shoot."

"Yesterday, when I was talking to him about the hearing and his feelings on it — how did that go, by the way?"

"Oh, demerits and lost a few hours of my Saturday, nothing major," I said.

"I'm glad to hear it. As I was saying, I asked him about that, and when he seemed reluctant to be entirely honest with me, I took you up on your suggestion to use his full first name. His reaction was...." He trailed off, seeming to be searching for how to explain it.

Grinning knowingly, I said, "Ah, he hitcha with the Bambi eyes, huh?"

In a voice heavy with skepticism, Quint asked, "Are you saying that was an act?"

I laughed. "Nope, that was one-hundred-percent genuine Seb, pure and unconcealed. Sorry, I should've warned you, but I thought you'd've noticed already. He's got this innate ability to light up any protective proclivities you might have like a Christmas tree. Happens to everyone around him, and of course you and I are even more susceptible. And he has *no idea* he does it."

There was a pause before he asked, “What does that mean, then, in terms of how I relate to him?”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t be worried. Like I said, I don’t call him by his full name because I don’t need to, and I don’t often use the Top Voice either, for various reasons, but none of them have anything to do with thinking he’s too fragile for it.”

In fact, one of the main reasons was that Seb tended to get turned on by *me* speaking in a dominant tone. He’d kill me if I told Quint that, though.

“It’ll probably go down a few notches as he gets used to you,” I added. “Remind him it’s not the end of the world, and he’ll be fine. He also reacts well to joking or being held.”

“I did hug him directly after, and it seemed to help,” Quint said.

“See, I knew you have good instincts,” I said, cheerful. “Just remember, he’s more sensitive than he looks most of the time, and tougher than he seems when he actually lets his guard down.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Great. Oh, also, there’s a DVD in his bag. It has The Joy of Painting on it. Y’know, Bob Ross, happy little trees? He watches it when he’s upset or sick. I figured it’d be a good choice for when he’s high as the International Space Station, too.”

I thought I heard a smile in Quint’s voice as he replied, “We’ll put it on after dinner, then.”

“Awesome,” I said. “Now I really do have to go. Thanks again. Tell Seb I love him.”

“I will,” he said, and I hung up and dashed off to chow calls.

I don’t think I got a single menu item correct that night, but I was loud enough and fast enough that none of the upperclassmen noticed.

Chapter Fifteen

I lay on my side — too dizzy when I sat up, too qualmish — staring at the glass Theo had brought in and set down on the coffee table. It was making me think of something. Had I thought of something? I couldn't remember if I had, or what it was. Light reflected through the glass, silvery and golden at the same time. *Maybe silver and gold are the same color, really. How would I paint that?*

"Seb, you should drink."

Turning my head, I looked up at Quint standing over me, and then closed my eyes. He was much too tall.

I remembered part of what I'd forgotten to think.

"You ask a glass of water," I told him, with my eyes still shut.

"What?" Theo asked, from somewhere on my right. "You've got a glass of water right there."

That struck me as terribly funny. "No," I choked out. "You *ask* a glass of water."

"I believe he's quoting, angel," Quint said. "It's from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. 'What's so unpleasant about being drunk? You ask a glass of water.'"

"Yes!" I said, pointing in the direction of his voice, which had moved from behind the couch to around by my head. "Couldn't remember the beginning."

"Well, luckily for you, Quint is a huge nerd," said Theo.

So was Keegan. She'd read that book when I was ten and quoted it constantly for at least a year. The song from the movie, "So Long and Thanks for All the Fish," was the last one played at hers and Jaz's wedding reception. Zain had dragged me onto the dance floor and dipped himself in my arms at the end. I, caught by surprise, almost dropped him. For a moment, I was there, his laughter echoing in my ears.

"Are you feeling nauseous?" Quint asked, and I snapped back to the living room. He sounded lower down now. Risking opening my eyes, I saw he'd sat on the coffee table.

Better. I nodded, cautiously.

"Alright, I understand," he said, "but I'd like you to try sipping this water, please. It could help."

“Plus, cottonmouth is no fun,” Theo said.

My mouth was dry. I pushed myself up with one elbow, feeling like I was stranded on a tiny boat in a choppy sea, and Quint held the glass out. It shimmered. The entire world shimmered with so many colors I ran out of words to describe them. *How could I possibly paint them all?* I’d be a failure if I didn’t. I’d never sell anything and Zain would be stuck supporting me for the rest of his life and—

“Seb?” said Quint.

“Hm?”

“It’s alright. Take the glass.”

I had no idea how long he’d been offering it to me. Theo was frowning, so it must’ve been awhile. All of my self-consciousness came back from wherever it was hiding and flushed my cheeks. “Sorry,” I said, reaching out.

“It’s alright,” he repeated. “What would you like for dinner?”

I took a small sip of the water. It was cool and so sweet I almost wondered if it had something else in it, but the sweetness tasted like water, too. *Water-flavored water?* It was good. My stomach rebelled at the thought of solid food, though. “Um, I don’t think I can eat right now,” I said. “And I had something earlier, after the... the cookie, around four-thirty.”

He nodded. “Okay. Would you like to watch your DVD?”

Zain had made me bring *The Joy of Painting*. I’d forgotten. I wanted to tell Quint yes, but what if there were too many colors? It would be ruined for me; I’d never be able to watch it again.

Theo said, “Pixar movies are also good when you’re too high.”

Pixar would just make me miss Zain more. “I’ll watch the DVD.”

Quint got it from my bag and put it in while Theo sat down on the couch next to me. I curled my legs to make room for him, and Jagger jumped up to lay stretched across both of us.

“Is he okay there?” Theo asked. “I can make him move, if you want.”

I shook my head. Transferring the glass to my other hand, I buried my fingers in the dog’s fur, behind his ears. He thumped his tail against Theo’s leg.

“Try to drink some more of that,” Quint told me, coming back to the couch to hand Theo the remote. “Let me know right away if you start feeling any worse, understand?”

I nodded and took another sip of the sweet water. It cut through the sick feeling, yet my heart was still beating faster than normal.

What if I have a heart attack? Oh, gods, I'm going to die, I thought in sudden terror. *NO. Keegan said that would happen. Nothing to worry about. Stop worrying about it. Stop.*

To distract myself, I turned to Theo as Quint walked towards the kitchen and said, “You... you know a lot about being, um...”

“Stoned?” he supplied, grinning. “Yeah, I used to smoke weed. Years ago, mostly before I knew Quint, and I’ve only been as baked as you are right now once, but it’s a memorable experience.”

There was something about the way he said ‘memorable’ that sounded like maybe he meant another word. “Was it scary?” I asked him, and he looked uncertainly over my head, at Quint, and didn’t answer. In a soft voice, I said, “I’m scared.”

“Hey, it’s okay,” said Theo. Leaning across Jagger, he rested his hand on my elbow. “Look, it wasn’t easy, but I had Quint just like you do, and he made it a lot better. You’ll be fine.”

That calmed me down enough to look at the TV, where Bob Ross was explaining the painting while the names of the colors on his palette flashed across the bottom of the screen. There weren’t many at all, and that was comforting, too.

“Maybe we’ll have a happy little sun in this painting,” he said.

I thought I heard Theo snort, though when I looked at him, he was simply watching the screen. I focused back on it, too, as Bob Ross started laying down the color, the familiar sound of his brush on the canvas lulling me.

Time stretched. At first, I was feeling okay — still anxious and slightly green, but I could push it to the back of my mind and think about creating happy little trees. Then it hit me like a runaway train from nowhere. My thoughts raced, full of fear: about losing Zain, about having some sort of diabetic emergency, about Quint and Theo getting sick of me being around all the time. It felt like being on the edge of a panic attack for an eternity. I curled up into a ball and closed my eyes, listening to my heart pounding. *Stop. Stop. Please just stop. ARRÊTEZ!*

“Seb?” Theo asked. I felt his hand on my knee and flinched away, making Jagger jump down. “Quint!”

Ages later, I heard Quint’s voice. “Seb? Can you talk to me?”

No. If I did, who knew what would come out?

“Okay,” he said. “I’m going to take your pulse and blood pressure. Angel, please get me my attaché case.”

He sounded equally calm and soothing as he spoke to each of us. Was Theo freaking out, too? What did he think of me?

You came into his home and had a mental breakdown on his couch twice in four days now, a terrible voice whispered in reply. He never wants to see you again, idiot.

I tried to rise, so I could leave and stop bothering them, but Quint caught me by the shoulders as I sat up and kept me from standing.

“Seb, try to open your eyes.”

My head jerked from side to side, and another wave of nausea hit me. I clapped my hand to my mouth, sure for a moment that I was going to puke, before it passed.

“Do you need to use the bathroom?” Quint asked.

I lowered my hand and said, “Need t—to leave.”

“No,” he said, simply. “Lay down again, please.” He guided me, not giving me much choice but to obey. I felt a little better once I was horizontal. “Breathe on my count. In through your nose... two... three... out through your mouth... two... three... four... five. Yes, like that. Good.” He squeezed my shoulder and let go with one hand, saying “Thank you, angel. Go wash up and eat. I have this taken care of.”

‘This’ being me. I tried not to think about that, instead concentrating on counting my breaths like he’d said. *In... deux... trois... out... deux... trois... quatre... cinq.*

“Okay, I’m going to put the blood pressure cuff on your upper arm,” Quint said.

I felt him wrap it around my bicep and then a cool metal circle pressing against my skin just below it. The stethoscope, I realized. I held still as the cuff inflated and deflated.

“Good,” he said. “You’re doing great, Seb. Now I’m going to measure your pulse.” He pressed two fingers against my wrist.

It seemed to take forever, even though I was counting my breaths and knew it was only about ten seconds before he released me and removed the cuff.

I cracked my eyelids apart a few millimeters. Quint gave me a small smile. "Your blood pressure is fine. Pulse is slightly elevated, as expected. It's nothing dangerous. I'd like to get a glucose reading, too. Can you do that, or would you like me to?"

"I can," I said, trying to hold onto the small bit of normalcy I had left. "Where's my bag?"

He picked it up from the floor, passed it to me, and watched while I took out the test kit.

Probably thinks you can't do it unsupervised. He's probably right, too.

Biting my bottom lip, I concentrated hard on performing the test exactly by the book. Quint waited patiently, not saying anything. When the result came up on the screen, I told him, "That's on target for after a meal. See, I'm fine. I can leave now."

"No, you aren't going anywhere until morning, at the very earliest," he said, calmly taking the kit out of my hands. "I told Zain I would keep an eye on you, and that is what I intend to do."

"But—"

With a note of finality, he said, "That is the end of the discussion, young man. There will be no more arguments, understood?"

I squirmed and blushed all the way down to my toes. He was looking at me with one eyebrow raised, like he was waiting for an acknowledgement. "...*Oui, monsieur*," I said.

"Thank you."

Before I could recover, Zain's ringtone started playing from my bag. I dived for it and dug out my phone. "Z?"

"How are you, *habibi*?"

"I'm okay," I said, and he snorted.

"Let me rephrase that: Get on Skype so I can see how you are. I scarfed my food and got dismissed from dinner early. Headed back to my room right now."

Quint was still watching me. I moved the phone away from my mouth a little. "Could I, um, use your computer?"

"Yes, of course," he said. "Let me get you set up with it."

I discovered he had to help me walk to the office, which was a nasty shock. My feet felt like they were five times their usual size. Then the world seemed to speed up and skip. I had no awareness of him turning on the computer, but suddenly I was sitting in front of it, with Zain's face on the screen.

"Jeez, your eyes are red, babe," was the first thing he said. I didn't know how to respond to that.

"That's normal," Quint said after a moment, from behind me. "He's only showing symptoms of a large amount of THC in his system. If there was anything else in that cookie, we would have known by now."

Zain blew out a heartfelt breath, relaxed his shoulders, and said, "Good. Thank you," and tears burst into my eyes like the sudden downpour of a thunderstorm.

"I'm so s—sorry," I sobbed. "I didn't m—m—mean for this to ha—appen."

It was appalling, and I could do absolutely nothing to stop it. I felt like I was watching myself from outside my body.

"*Habibi*, of course you didn't!"

Quint crouched down next to my chair and pulled me into a hug. I dropped my head on his shoulder, turned so I could still see Zain, and clung to the other Top. *Needy. Pathetic*, accused the voice in my head. I cried harder, knowing it was true.

"It's okay, babe," said Zain. He was leaning close to the screen, like he wanted to reach through it. "It's okay, I know this wasn't your fault, you're okay, it's okay."

"Seb, you should try to get some sleep," Quint said. "You'll feel better in the morning."

"Great idea. Think you could sleep, *habibi*?"

I seriously doubted it, with the way my heart and mind were both still going a million miles an hour. I wanted them to stop worrying about me, though, so I nodded.

"Good," Zain said. "The only thing is, it's too early for the Lantus shot."

My long-acting insulin is supposed to be given at the same time every day. There was some wiggle room in that, but not this much. If I took it now, I'd mess everything up. I'd go to sleep and die in the middle of the night, and Zain—

Quint asked, "When does he usually do it? I can wake him."

“Nine o’clock,” Zain said. “Also, he didn’t pack pajamas.”

I was blubbing too hard to object to the way they were both talking over me, or to voice my concern that Quint would forget. Then he gently pried me off his shoulder and gazed right into my eyes, looking utterly unshakable, and I had a mental image — so strong it was nearly a hallucination — of the fear flying away. “I’m going to get you something to wear,” he said. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

Wiping my face, I nodded. His hand brushed through my hair at the nape of my neck, almost tousling it, as he straightened up and left the room. I turned back to Zain and let him chatter at me, not paying much attention to the words. It was nonsense, something about me and Quint and Christmas trees.

When Quint came back with Theo’s ‘Here Comes Treble’ shirt and a pair of flannel pants, I was only sniffing. “They’ll probably be a couple inches too short and a bit loose on you,” he said, setting the clothes down on the bed. “You would swim in mine, though. Let me know when you’re done changing.” He went out again, shutting the door behind him.

Zain helpfully guided me to make sure I didn’t stick my head in the wrong hole of the shirt. As I sat on the bed to put my feet in the pants, he said, “Hey, babe, how do you make antifreeze? Take away her pajamas!” I stopped to glare at him, and he grinned and asked, “What?”

“Awful,” I told him. After pulling the pants the rest of the way up, I opened the door to let Quint in and bemoaned, “I have an awful Top.”

“You see the way he disrespects me?” Zain asked. “Impudent brat.”

Smiling, Quint turned the covers of the bed down and motioned for me to climb in. I did. The sheets were soft and smelled freshly-washed, and the comforter had a knit cover. I settled under it on my stomach while Quint moved the desk chair closer to sit. He rubbed my back, and Zain chattered to me, and despite my earlier doubts, I drifted off.

It was a patchy, sticky sleep, though. I hovered between wakefulness and dreams of indescribable, shifting patterns of color, like mandalas yet infinitely more complex. At some point, I became aware that Zain wasn’t talking anymore, and called out for him. “He went to study,” said Quint’s voice. “Do you want me to Skype him again?”

Yes.

I shook my head.

Then — or perhaps much later — I heard Theo, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying.

You're keeping his Top from him, whispered the voice in my head. *He'll hate you.*

Struggling, I tried to rouse myself. It felt like swimming in muck.

"Shhh, Seb, it's alright," Quint said.

"Is this how I was?" Theo asked, distressed and much closer. "I'm so sorry I broke my promise."

The muck swallowed me up again. The next thing I knew was a sweet taste in my mouth, a sharp pain in my arm, and Quint, gentler than ever, saying, "It's okay, *mon chaton*, almost done."

Almost done what? I thought, right before deep sleep finally came.

The patterns returned, a grotesque kaleidoscope that was also a hospital hallway and Zain was carrying me and the colors were bleeding out of the world like I'd washed them down the sink the last time I rinsed out my brushes, blurring and muting and mixing into mucky brown like the muck I'd sunk into, and it was over my eyes or I was going blind, drowning in a sea of no colors, gasping for air — *gods, no, please* —

"Seb, wake up."

— *please, I need the colors, even if there's too many, I swear I'll find a way, I need them for art and art is my nature, is all I know how to be, please give them back, please!*

"You're having a bad dream, Seb. Wake up."

It was Quint. He sounded so calm, so unquestionable. The absence of color, of shape and shadow, was intensely vivid, but Quint said it was a dream... *please let it be a dream.*

I parted my eyelids and saw only blackness.

"Shhh, it's okay, it's a nightmare, *mon chaton*. Wake up, now."

Sobs were caught in my throat, stopping my words. I felt his hand on the back of my neck and realized I'd curled up on my side in a fetal position, my face buried in my arms. Slowly, afraid of what, I didn't know, I lifted my head up and discovered I *could* see. The room was illuminated in dark blues and violets and grays, faded, but just waiting for sunlight to bring them back to their true hues. Relief pushed tears to the corners of my eyes.

"*There* you are," said Quint. He looked like he hadn't moved from the desk chair for even a minute, and he was holding out my kit, already opened, in the hand that wasn't on my shoulder.

“Can you test your glucose for me, please?”

Oh.

Sitting up, I shivered as the blanket slipped down to my waist and cooler air hit my damp skin. I'd sweated right through Theo's pajamas. A nocturnal low hadn't hit me in awhile, and this one seemed to be making up for lost time. Or maybe the marijuana was worsening it. My body had the heavy, sluggish feeling I associate with a high sugar level, like I was experiencing both simultaneously.

The nightmare was still there, just at the edges of my brain, threatening to creep into my thoughts.

I took the kit from him and tried forcing myself to concentrate on testing, but the packets of alcohol wipes slipped through my fingers and refused to tear. Quint reached out. Yanking away, I said, “I've *got* it,” and then took in a gasp of air and snapped my mouth shut. What the hell was I doing, talking to him like that?! “Sorry. I'm sorry.”

“It's alright,” he said. “Would you like help?”

I nodded and held out one of the packets. He tore it easily, extracted the wipe, and handed it to me. As I sanitized my finger, he turned his head slightly, cocking his ear towards the open doorway.

“Angel, go back to bed.”

Whatever had alerted him, I hadn't caught it, but I did clearly hear Theo's sigh and his footsteps. Rather than retreating, they were coming closer. A moment later, he poked his head around the doorframe and said, “I heard Seb crying.”

“He's okay,” Quint said, while I blushed. “It was a nightmare. Go on, please.”

Theo looked uncertainly at me, and then at the kit in my lap. “Is your diabetes acting up, too?”

“I'm fine, really,” I said, pulling one knee up to my chest. “I just need to eat something, and I have snacks in my bag. You can both go to bed. Don't let me keep you up.”

Quint glanced at me before turning back to his husband and saying, very mildly, “Theodore, I believe I've conveyed an instruction twice now. I do not intend to repeat myself a third time.”

Theo's ears took on a more pink tone, visible even in the dimness. “Yes, sir,” he said, and vanished with haste.

I decided not to suggest that Quint go with him again.

My hands shook as I did the test under his watchful eye. It came back at 53 mg/dl, and Quint said, “Hmm. Perhaps I should’ve given you more than a juice box earlier.”

“You gave me juice?” I asked, blinking, while he retrieved my bag from the floor and set it on the bed next to me.

“Yes,” he said. “On Zain’s suggestion, when I administered your Lantus. You were almost fully asleep, but you drank it.”

The pain in the back of my upper arm, I remembered. My hand went to the spot, pressing gently. I didn’t feel a bruise.

Quint went on, “Zain also explained how to do that before he signed off. We both thought it would be best for you to sleep as much as possible.” Then he nodded at my bag. “You should eat something.”

Chagrin made me duck my head as I opened the bag. He’d given me a shot and a juice box, and I hadn’t even protested. When Zain was doing all my Lantus injections in the spring, at least I usually *attempted* to convince him otherwise — and earned myself a spanking in the process, on a few occasions. Now my body had betrayed me by showing its weaknesses so obviously that Quint probably thought I needed constant supervision.

The voice in my head was back, whispering terrible things.

“Were you here all night?” I asked him, louder than I meant to, trying to drown it out. “Didn’t you sleep?”

The corners of his lips curved up slightly. “It’s only half-past midnight. I have plenty of time to sleep. Eat, please.”

It felt later. Everything had the haziness you only get at three in the morning. There was no alarm clock for me to verify his words, though, and Quint was now giving me the same mild expression he’d aimed at Theo. I quickly dug into the bottom of my bag and, after about ten seconds of searching, came out with a squashed nutrition bar.

“Will that be enough?” he asked.

Nodding, I ripped it open to bite off half of it. Then I blinked in surprise again, as delicious, complex flavors unfurled across my tongue. I keep the bars as a last-resort snack, when I don’t have anything else, because they’re tasteless. Maybe this one was a different brand? I turned it over and peered at the wrapper, trying to remember what I’d had before.

I was too preoccupied to help as Quint moved my bag to the floor again and my kit to the nightstand, in easy reach. “Would you like a glass of water?” he asked.

No, it was the same brand as always, and the same flavor, too. Huh.

“Seb? Water?”

My head jerked up. “Oh. No danks,” I said, with my mouth full.

Quint smiled. “Okay. Lie down while you finish that, please.”

That sounded like a good idea. As I stretched out on my stomach, he rested his hand between my shoulderblades. I swallowed and said, “You can go. I’m okay now.”

“I will after you’re settled,” he said, with just a hint of firmness. “Now, eat the rest of that, and no more trying to stop me from taking care of you, understand?”

Flushing, I nodded against the pillow.

“I’d like a verbal answer.”

“*Oui, monsieur*,” I said, before pushing the other half of the bar into my mouth. ‘*Monsieur*’ means ‘sir,’ but I never call Zain that, even when every single other word spilling out of my mouth is French, so it was fine for Quint. Fitting, really.

“Thank you,” he said. “Close your eyes, please.”

I did, and fell asleep again in no time, under the solid weight of his hand.

Will this night end?

It didn’t want to, it seemed. I had no idea how many minutes or hours had passed, except that Quint was no longer in the room. Haziness was still clinging to everything, including my brain. My heart rate had slowed, and my thoughts with it. They were almost at a crawl, in fact, floating around untethered by anything. Part of me observed them as if they were clouds scuttling across a clear blue sky. It felt a bit like meditating.

Then they started to coalesce, focusing on one topic: food. On the nutrition bar, specifically.

I shifted to the edge of the bed and reached down for my bag. It was just beyond my fingertips. Wiggling, I hung my torso off the mattress and stretched farther. *Almost...yes!* But as I grasped it, I lost my balance and had to clutch the leg of the nightstand in my other hand to keep myself from falling on my head. It thudded into the wall, and I froze in place, half upside-down, listening. Bad enough that I'd kept Quint and Theo up well into the night without waking them, too. After several seconds, though, I didn't hear anything, not even Jagger's collar jingling. Carefully, I pushed myself back onto the bed and opened the bag.

The contents were a jumbled mess. I'd packed by throwing things into it haphazardly, so nothing was in its usual place. Shoving my hand in, I felt around for the wrapper of another bar. No luck. That had probably been my last one. I came out with my phone instead, thinking I could at least check the time. When I pressed the button to wake the screen, the clock read 4:47, and below that, there was an email notification from the name B. Platt.

I stared for a few seconds, wondering if I was hallucinating. *Why would Platt email me? How?* Reading it would be the best way to find out, I figured, so I swiped it open.

This is Bradley Platt. Mohyeldin gave me your email address. He also, over the summer, gave me a mandala you colored. After I saw him and you during Parents Weekend, I tore it up. Because I was angry at him, and at myself, and at you, too, I think. Regardless, it was wrong. I apologize. I don't deserve it, but do you think he would give me another one, if I asked? He said he has more.

That was all, not even a signature at the end. Short, brusque, and oddly poignant. From what I knew about him, the same description could be applied to the author. I wanted to reply with something nice.

Dear Bradley, I wrote.

No, he'd requested to be called 'Platt' before. I deleted it and typed again.

Dear Platt,

Of course Zain would give you another one, but if you don't want to ask him, I'll send you one. I have lots. I meditate on them sometimes. Do you meditate? You should. Everyone should. It teaches you so much. Mostly, though, loving-kindness, towards yourself and towards others.

Why is that so much easier to do towards others? Do you see the good parts of them better, or you don't see the bad parts of them, because they're hidden deep inside? The more you know someone, the less good you'll see? No, because, I know Zain better than myself, and his goodness shines. Every day, it's so bright. You see it, don't you? You must. It's brighter than the sun. He's my sun. Is that why you were so upset about the hearing? Dimming him?

Anyway, I forgive you. Why were you mad at me, too? I thought you thought Zain was abusing me? It doesn't matter.

And I'm sorry for this. I think I'm rambling. My mind isn't in order right now. Sorry.

Seb Crews

It was a mess, but I hit send before I could reconsider. That done, my thoughts returned to the idea of food, with the ravenous kind of preoccupation I get during a low. *Wait, am I low again? Must be.*

Slowly, I slid off the bed and padded to the hall. Quint and Theo's bedroom door was open. I crept in the opposite direction, carrying my weight on the balls of my feet.

Jagger got up from his cushion as I came into the living room and followed me to the kitchen. His tags clinked together incredibly loudly. I twisted around and looked down at him with my finger to my lips, and he cocked his head at me. *Oh, right. Dog.*

Imitating Theo, I pointed to the floor at his feet. He obediently sat. "Good dog," I whispered. Now I just needed to figure out what to eat. Glancing around, I saw a bunch of bananas next to the coffee maker. *Perfect.* I grabbed one and dropped down into a half-lotus position on the floor, with my back against the cabinets. Jagger watched from a yard away as I peeled the banana and bit into it.

It was *incredible*. Like I could taste every single separate flavor in the fruit, down to the rain and sunshine and soil that had nourished the plant. I had to close my eyes to fully process it, chewing slowly. The texture was wonderful, too. I swallowed that bite and took another, and I could swear this one tasted subtly different and even more unbelievable.

"Ah, I see the munchies have set in."

I looked up at the soft voice. Theo was standing by the pantry doors, grinning at me. Swallowing again, I asked, "Is that what this is? Thought I was low."

"Shhh, keep it down," he whispered, crossing the room to squat in front of me.

"Sorry," I said, quieter. "It's *good*, though. Here." I held out the banana for him to try, and he had to grab Jagger's collar to prevent the dog from sniffing at it.

"I know, fruit is amazing when you're toasted," he said. "Know what's the absolute best, though? Burritos."

My eyes widened. "Do you have any?"

Theo laughed. "No, sorry, but—"

"Pardon me, would either of you care to explain what you're doing out here at five o'clock in the morning?"

I jumped. Was that the... what had Theo called it? The Ice Voice? It certainly gave *me* chills. The other Brat seemed unconcerned, though, as he straightened and turned to Quint, who had his arms crossed over his chest and a frown on his face.

"I heard Seb get up," said Theo. "I wanted to check on him."

"You should have woken me up as well, then," Quint replied.

"Apparently, I *did*."

"Theodore William."

"It's my fault," I said, before it could get any worse. They both looked back at me, Theo with a surprised expression and Quint, a concerned one. "I got up to eat when I shouldn't've," I explained to the Top. "I thought I was low, but Theo says it's munchies."

Quint walked around his husband and crouched down where he'd been a few moments before. "Did you test for a low?"

I shook my head in shame. It hadn't even occurred to me.

"Okay, and how many bananas did you eat?" he asked.

"Just two bites from this one," I said, holding up the rest of it. "That's probably not enough to make me high."

"Shit, I didn't even consider that," said Theo.

Quint glanced over his shoulder at him, and then back to me. He held out a hand. "May I have the rest of that, please?"

I folded the peel over the fruit and dropped it in his palm. Then, gulping, I fiddled with the drawstring of the pajama bottoms I was wearing. "Am I in trouble?"

"No, *mon chaton*," he said, gently. "You aren't thinking clearly. It's not your fault." To Theo, he added, "Neither is it yours, angel, and I understand you were worried about him. However, this is why I should have been woken up as well."

“Yes, sir,” said Theo, with his eyes on Jagger at his feet.

I felt bad for him, yet I was also stuck on something Quint had said, and vague memories from earlier in the night. “You called me that again,” I said.

Quint frowned. “Called you what?”

“‘*Mon chaton*.’ You’ve called me it three times now, but I was half-asleep before and thought I was dreaming it.”

He looked surprised. “Did I? I hadn’t realized. That’s what my nanny called me when I was young.”

“What’s it mean?” Theo asked. He’d perked up with interest. I thought for that reason alone I should translate, even if it was a bit embarrassing.

“My kitten,” I admitted.

He laughed, and I flushed. Immediately, he said, “Oh, no, Seb, I didn’t mean— it fits *you*, really. I was just trying to imagine someone calling *Quint* that.”

I tried, too, and bit down hard on the inside of my cheek.

Quint glanced between us. Then, shaking his head, he said, “I won’t say it if it bothers you, Seb.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said, giggling a tiny bit. “It’s better than ‘*mon petit trognon*.’ That’s what my mom used to call me. It means something like ‘cutie pie,’ but translated literally, it’s ‘my little fruit core.’”

That cracked Theo up entirely, and I couldn’t help joining him.

With another shake of his head, Quint stood, set the banana down on the counter, and held his hand out to me. “Alright, back to bed for both of you. Let’s go.”

I took it and got to my feet. He led us through the living room, snapping his fingers at Jagger and pointing to the dog bed as we passed. At the office, he sent Theo down the hall with a pat on his bottom before steering me through the doorway.

“You really don’t have to stay until I’m asleep this time,” I said, climbing under the covers. “I’m good now.”

He looked me over with a critical eye. “You might be feeling better at the moment, but you’re still under the influence of the drug. Did you have any more nightmares?”

I shook my head.

“Do a test, please.”

“I’m okay,” I said. “I mean, I kept thinking about food, and I was kinda fuzzy, so I figured I was low. I know I’m not, now.”

He hesitated a moment, and then said, “I don’t doubt your ability to know that under normal circumstances. However, your judgement is currently impaired. I’m not going to make you test, but I would appreciate it if you did. You don’t even need to share the results with me, if you’d rather not.”

I looked from his kind face to my meter, lying in my open kit. Testing wouldn’t hurt, and he was right, it was probably better to be safe.

I made sure to clean my fingertip very well beforehand, to remove any traces of sugar from the banana that could cause a falsely high reading. Quint watched, but he averted his eyes as the meter counted down.

“It’s on target,” I said.

“Thank you,” he replied. “I’ll wake you up in a couple of hours to do another.” I didn’t argue with that. My impromptu snack meant I needed to be extra careful. He went on, “Until then, stay in this bed and call me if you need anything.”

“I will.”

Leaning over me, he pulled the covers up closer to my shoulders before saying, “Sweet dreams,” and going out. He left the door open behind him.

I rolled onto my side and was about to close my eyes when I saw that my phone, sitting on the nightstand, was lit up. A text from Zain had arrived several minutes ago, while we were in the kitchen.

Couldn’t sleep. Saw this and thought of you, he’d written, shortly followed by the cover art of Disney’s DVD release of *The Brave Little Toaster*.

One of these days, I really was going to swat him.⁴

⁴ The extra [Pillow Talk 2](#) goes here.

Pain throbbed in my right temple and nausea churned in my stomach as Quint woke me again. Groaning, I rolled onto my back and made myself open my eyes. He was sitting in the desk chair pulled up next to the bed.

“Headache?” he asked. I nodded, gingerly, and he said, “I’ll get you painkillers and some water. Are you allergic to any medications, and are you taking any other than insulin?”

“No and no,” I mumbled.

“Alright, I’ll be right back. Can you test your glucose?”

I couldn’t think of anything I wanted to do less at the moment, except perhaps standing, but diabetes doesn’t care if you’re already feeling horrible. Reaching over, I pulled my kit onto the bed as he went out.

The meter was counting down to the reading when he returned. “That’s an okay number,” I told him when 120 mg/dl flashed on the screen. It was higher than my usual morning target, but I hadn’t fasted the full night. Quint nodded and sat down on the edge of the mattress.

“Here,” he said, holding out two pills and a glass of water. “I know you must be feeling sick to your stomach, too. These are acetaminophen, so they won’t upset it more. Go easy.”

I propped myself on my side before taking them. The cool water felt good in my dry mouth, and I gulped down a couple of swallows.

“Easy,” Quint repeated, holding the bottom of the glass to stop me. “Take small sips, please.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I will.”

He let go yet kept watching as I slowly drank the rest of it.

I put the empty glass down on the nightstand and said, “*Merci beaucoup*. I’m sorry I kept you and Theo both up last night. And, um, earlier this morning.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he said. “That’s why we’re here.”

Discomfort over *that*, even more than the pressure in my bladder, made me sit up fully and pull my legs out from under the covers, saying, “I have to use the bathroom.”

“Alright,” said Quint. He stood to give me space.

As I crawled off the bed and got to my feet, a wave of dizziness hit, lurching the room around me, and I swayed. Quint grabbed my elbow.

"I'm fine," I said, with a couple of unsteady steps away from him. "Just need to pee."

He didn't stop me — I had to stop myself, in fact, when another wave swept over me as I reached the door — but he didn't let go, either, and he said, "If you're about to fall over, you are not 'fine,' Seb. That pushes the definition of the word to the point where I would consider it a lie. Is that understandable?"

I blushed and dropped my gaze to the floor. "*Oui, monsieur.*"

"Good," he said, with a small incline of his chin. "Now, I'm going to help you to the bathroom, where I will wait outside while you use it. However, you're going to leave it unlocked and be extremely careful. Clear?"

I nodded. He kept looking down at me as he stood in the doorway, suddenly seeming very large. It took me a few moments to realize what he was waiting for. "Oh, um, *oui, monsieur.*"

"Thank you," he said. "I do prefer verbal answers to questions like that, so there isn't any confusion. It also makes a stronger impression than a simple headshake. I'll remind you in the future. Ready?"

"Yeah," I said.

The pause had helped me gain my balance, and it stayed with me as we crossed the hallway to the bathroom. Quint's hand was firmly wrapped around my elbow, though he was simply holding it, not supporting or guiding me. When he let go, I was able to enter the bathroom, shut the door behind me, and do my business on my own.

My reflection in the mirror over the sink showed I had faintly pink eyes and pale skin. I splashed water on my face after washing my hands, and dried off with a fluffy towel. The rubbing brought some color to my cheeks. Coming out, I looked much better and felt less nauseous, at least.

"I need to dress," I told Quint as I slipped past him. "My first class starts in an hour and a half, and I have to go get my stuff beforehand."

He followed me to the office and frowned, watching me pick up my test kit. "Seb, I told Zain I'd keep you here until you were back to normal."

"I am," I said, zipping the kit shut, and when he raised an eyebrow at me, I quickly clarified, "Um, I mean, I *will be* as soon as those painkillers kick in. I'm not high anymore, and my pulse is good, too. See?" I held out my wrist to him.

Sighing, he sat down in the desk chair with his elbows on his knees. I backed up to the side of the bed. Even knowing he wouldn't do anything, I felt less exposed with something blocking my butt.

"What would Zain say about you attending this class? Should we call him?"

I fiddled with the chain of the dog tags around my neck. "He's at breakfast right now," I said. "He can't answer the phone."

"That doesn't matter; he told me to call whenever I needed to and he would get back to me," Quint said. "Although I don't think I have to talk to him to know what he'd say, do I?"

No, he didn't. I doubted he knew *how* Zain would say it — something like, *Sure, brat, you're just peachy, I can tell. In fact, since you're obviously feeling soooo much better, let's have a headstand contest before you go! C'mon, I'll start!* — but they both would have the same basic idea.

There were tears in my eyes, and I hated it. "I already missed a full Wednesday of classes a few weeks ago, when I had a bad diabetes spell. I can't do that again this soon."

Quint's face softened. "I didn't say it would be the full day, *mon chaton*," he said. "What time is your second class?"

"Eleven," I said, unwillingly.

"That's good. You'll have plenty of time to catch up on missed sleep and fully recover. I can also write you a note for the first class." He smiled a little. "I am a doctor, remember."

That only took care of one part of the problem. The second part was staring me in the face, quite literally, and the third was sleeping in the room down the hall.

"I don't... I don't want to be in your way," I said.

"You aren't," he replied, and I thought maybe Theo's android theory was right. It shouldn't be humanly possible to look that patient. "I'm not sure how often I'll need to repeat this to you, but I'm willing to say it every day: You are welcome here." He paused, like he was letting that sink in, and then added, "I work from home most Wednesdays, so I don't have anywhere to go, and I think Theo would be disappointed to wake up and find you'd left."

I sniffed and wiped my eyes. "I'll just stay until he wakes up and the headache's gone, then."

He nodded. "Good. Lay down, please."

After that, I must've fallen asleep again, although I meant to only meditate a little. Zain's text alert woke me. I fumbled to unlock my phone.

How's my brave little toaster today?

Better, I wrote back, and it was actually the full truth. The headache had vanished. *Also, shut up, you're awful.*

Yeah, I know xD, he replied. *Gotta go, class is starting.*

Mine would begin soon, too. I got up, changed into the jeans I'd worn the day before and my "Property of a Midshipman" t-shirt, which seemed to be the only piece of clothing I had packed, and then slung my bag over my shoulder and walked out to the hallway.

Quint and Theo were both sitting at the dining table, Quint facing me with a laptop open in front of him, and Theo in the chair on his right. The younger man was writing in a notebook. As I came out, Quint reached over, tapped it, and said, "Cross that one off, please."

"Quuuuinnnt," Theo said, and I hesitated at the entrance to the living room.

Unperturbed, the Top replied, "You know very well they don't count if they're not legible."

Theo huffed. "It *is* legible. *You* need to get your glasses checked."

"And *you* are making me reconsider whether you should be out of bed, young man."

With a scowl, Theo scribbled out the offending line. Then he looked up, and the scowl turned into a grin immediately. "Seb! You're awake! How're you feeling?"

"...Good," I said, still not sure about interrupting them, but neither of them seemed to mind.

"Is the headache gone?" Quint asked.

I nodded. "And the nausea and dizziness, too."

"I'm glad to hear it." He gestured to chair opposite his husband. "Sit down, please. I'll get you some breakfast."

"You don't have to," I said, walking over as he stood and moved toward the kitchen. "I need to leave soon."

Theo laughed. "Let me just save you some time. There's no way he's letting you go without eating, so you might as well give up now." He slouched down in his chair and pushed the other one out with his foot.

I glanced from him to Quint. "Um... do you have yogurt?"

Smiling, Quint said, "We have plain Chobani, and some berries you can mix into it. Would that be okay?"

"Yes, thank you," I said.

While I ate, Quint typed on the laptop and Theo wrote. I kept my eyes averted from the notebook. Zain's never assigned me lines, but it seemed like a personal thing. I finished the yogurt quickly and stood up to take my bowl to the sink.

"Do you have Tylenol at home?" Quint asked, following me. When I shook my head, he took a bottle from his pocket and held it out. "In case the headache comes back," he explained. "You can take two tablets every four to six hours. No more often, and no more than ten within twenty-four hours. It's extremely important, understood?"

"*Oui, monsieur.*"

From the table, Theo turned in his chair and gave me an amused look. "Sorry, did you just say 'yes, sir' in *French*? What, are you trying to show me up?"

"Let him be, angel."

"No, it's okay," I said. "I could teach you French if you wanted, Theo."

"Ah, let me think about that," he said.

"Kay. Well, I have to be going. Thank you both, though, for, um, everything."

"You're very welcome," Quint said. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "If you need anything else, just let us know."

Then Theo got up, came around the kitchen peninsula, and enveloped me in a hug from behind. I tensed before making myself relax a little. It was nice once I did, actually.

"Good lord, you're bony," he said as he let me go. "I think one of your vertebrae cut me. Ow."

Through giggles, I said, "Sorry."

“Go eat a cookie,” he said. “But, y’know, like a Chips Ahoy or something prepackaged, alright? No more strange cookies of unknown origin.”

I laughed harder, nodding, and both of them brought me to the door and waited until I was on the elevator before going back into their apartment.

The common area of my own was a mess, like usual after one of my roommates’ parties. Empty red plastic cups and other debris had been scattered everywhere. My face twisted as I picked my way through it to get to my room. That, at least, looked the same as I’d left it. I dropped my bag on my desk and rubbed at my temples. The headache was starting up again, but it wasn’t quite four hours since my first dose of Tylenol.

With a sigh, I backtracked to the kitchen for ice water, thinking maybe that would help. I opened the fridge door and then stopped, frowning. Something didn’t look right. It took me a moment to realize what: I’d had four insulin cartridges in the butter compartment. Now there were only three.

As I stared at them, Calvin came out of his and Mark’s room. “Oh, hey, dude! You alright? You missed a killer party last night.”

I picked up the cartridges, still connected together in their blister pack, and turned to him. “Um, do you know what happened to the fourth one of these?” I asked, holding the pack up. He walked closer to look and then shook his head. Behind him, Mark came out of the bedroom, too. “Mark?” I asked. “Do you know what happened to my other cartridge of insulin?”

“No?” he said, with barely a glance. “Why would I?”

Because you’re the one who asked me if you could get high off it, I thought. Could he have really decided to try it, though, after I’d warned him?

“I don’t know,” I said, carefully keeping my voice non-accusatory, “but I had four, and now there’s three. Maybe someone at the party took it. I don’t know, and I don’t want to get anyone in trouble, I swear. I just want it returned. It’s dangerous, guys.”

Suddenly, Mark glared at me and spat, “No one stole your fucking insulin!” with such vehemence that I stepped backward involuntarily. He spun around and stomped into his room again, slamming the door behind him. The noise made me flinch.

After a moment of ringing silence, Calvin asked, “Are you sure that you *had* four? Maybe you’re just, y’know... paranoid still.” He patted me on the shoulder with a kind, patronizing expression. “Why don’t you go sleep it off, Sebby?”

I blinked at him. *Maybe you're paranoid still?!*

"It's Seb," I said. "Only my family gets to call me 'Sebby.'" And then I took my three insulin cartridges — *there were four, I know there were four* — and left.

Adam, the British roommate who spent most of his time at his girlfriend's, was coming down the hall from the elevator. He dodged out of my way, looking astonished, for some reason. I ignored him. Stepping through the elevator doors just before they closed, I punched the button for one floor up. Blood pounded in my ears.

Students were waiting to get on as the doors opened again. They quickly moved to either side to let me through, and I made my way to my RA's apartment. My heart raced. I lifted a fist to knock on her door.

"Coming!" she called. About ten seconds later, it opened. She took her foamy toothbrush out of her mouth when she saw me. "Whoa. What happened?"

With a deep breath, I said, "I think one of my roommates stole my insulin."

Chapter Sixteen

Most of Tuesday night and into the morning, I spent thanking whatever higher powers there might be for Quint Hanniford. The man was a blessing. I watched him soothe Seb to sleep, rubbing his back the way I ached to, and I could see he cared deeply about my Brat, even after such a short time knowing him. Not that that's hard to do. Especially with Seb looking so fragile I just wanted to wrap him up in soft cotton and keep the whole world at bay.

Quint also let me vent to him about the idiot roommates, and listened patiently as I over-explained how to do the Lantus. "Make sure you disinfect the site first," I said, and saw a spark of amusement in his eyes over the Skype connection.

"Zain, I'm a doctor."

"Oh. Right," I said. "Sorry, I didn't mean to imply—"

"I know."

And of course, he probably *did* know exactly how I felt. I'd thought having another Top around would mostly be good for Seb, but it would definitely be nice for me, too, having someone to talk to who understood it.

"I wish I could stay on with you," I said. The clock in the corner of my screen showed my mandatory study period was starting in minutes. "Maybe I can." I glanced towards my door, which would soon be opening to admit JJ. "If we're quiet, no upperclassmen will overhear. My roommate wouldn't say anything."

"You just got out of trouble," Quint pointed out, gently. "Do you really want to risk having to explain to Seb that you're in it again?"

No, I couldn't do that to him. Not now, when the results of the last time were so evident.

Quietly, I said, "He ate that cookie because he went low in a studio, most likely because — almost certainly because — he was trying to distract himself from my hearing."

"*You* didn't lace it with THC," said Quint, "and Seb will recover fully from this by tomorrow evening, at the very latest."

"Yeah, I just would've rathered he not have to go through it at all," I said, before adding, "Have I mentioned I'd love to get his roommates alone?"

I had to keep reminding myself they were only dumb kids, barely out of their parents' houses and going overboard on their newfound freedom. Well, from now on, they could be party animals somewhere very far from Seb. I was already plotting how to get him moved.

If he didn't want to tell the college authorities about this incident, fine. I'd tell his parents and ask them if they could split rent with us on a studio apartment in a less-expensive part of the city. I hated going to them for financial help, but it would take more than we had saved up to pay for it ourselves, and I needed to know he was out of harm's way.

Quint interrupted my plans by saying, "It's eight o'clock; you should go. I give you my word I'll keep him safe, and I will let you know immediately if anything changes."

"Thank you," I said, and with one last, long look at Seb's back, rising and falling under Quint's hand with his slow breaths, I hung up.

Studying and sleeping were both difficult that night. Words couldn't describe my relief in the morning when Seb responded to my completely inappropriate Brave Little Toaster joke by calling me awful. Without being able to speak to him or see him, that gave me some assurance he really *was* better. Several minutes later, I got an email from Quint saying basically the same thing.

He's eating breakfast now, before he leaves, it read. Let me know if you need any other help.

I was reading under my desk while the instructor wrote on the whiteboard, and couldn't reply. As soon as the class let out, though, I typed back as I crossed the Yard to my next one.

Thank you. I will.

Wednesdays are one of my days with six classes, due to chem lab, and after that I have drill, which gives no chance to slip away unnoticed. Seb knows my schedule as well as his own and avoids texting me during busy periods. Still, when I didn't get even an emoji in response to several hilarious memes I sent him throughout the day, I started to worry. It wasn't until I was walking back to my room before evening chow calls that I saw a text from him.

He'd sent it during drill, and it said, *Can you try to get out of dinner early again? Need to talk to you.*

Frowning, I replied, *Of course babe! Everything okay?*

Yes. *I'm at Quint and Theo's.*

That only made me *more* worried. I knew he was safe there, but why had he gone back? The first text was sent during a period he normally had class, too, I noticed.

What happened? I asked.

There was a longer pause before he wrote back, *Need to tell you by Skype. I'm good though. You can ask Quint.*

He wouldn't offer that lightly, or without meaning it and knowing I'd call him on a bluff. Reassured somewhat, I said, *Don't have to but thanks <3 Ttyl!*

I rushed through dinner as quickly as possible and sent another text on my way back to my room, letting him know I was on the way. *K, I'm ready,* he replied. By the time I was sitting down in front of my computer, I was more curious than anything else.

"Hi, Z," he said.

"Hey, babe." I took a moment to study him. He looked tired, yet calm, not wound up and holding back tears.

From somewhere off-screen, Quint's voice said, "I'll be in the living room with Theo," and Seb nodded to him. That was good, too. Whatever he had to tell me, he was able to say it himself.

"So what's the big secret?" I asked.

He sighed, and then said, "When I got back to my apartment this morning, one of my insulin cartridges was gone."

My mind immediately went to his roommates. What was the name of the one who'd questioned him about getting high off insulin? Before I could remember, he gave the answer.

"I asked Mark and Calvin about it, and Mark reacted really suspiciously, and then he got angry and slammed his door, and Calvin tried to blame it on the cookie, like I didn't *know* how many cartridges I'd had," he said, indignation growing in his voice as he spoke. "He actually suggested maybe I was *paranoid* still. *And* he called me 'Sebby.'"

I winced. Seb has an odd relationship with that particular nickname. His family uses it constantly, and sometimes he's fine with it, but other times, it just rubs him the wrong way. I could guess from his annoyed look now that this was one of the later cases.

"So I went and got my RA—"

“Whoa, wait,” I said, biting back a grin as a sudden suspicion hit me. “You got your RA?”

“Yes, that’s what I said, didn’t I?”

“Help me picture it, though,” I said. “You had to go out of your apartment, and then what?”

Frowning, he said, “Down the hall, up the elevator, and down another hall. Zain, what’s the point of—?”

“Humor me,” I interrupted again. “Were you, by chance, feeling a bit peeved as you went and got the RA? Were people, say, leaping from your path?”

“I— They were... I mean, yes, I was mad because I felt like he was trying to gaslight me, and there were a few students in the hallways who moved, but why does that—?”

“Dammit!” I hit the top of my desk with my palm. “You did your murder walk and I didn’t get to watch!”

He stared at me in utter bafflement for a moment. “My *what??*?”

“Murder walk,” I repeated. “You do this thing where you look like you’re legitimately going to *kill* someone, and people throw themselves out of your way. It’s spectacular. I’m so sad I missed it.”

At that, his mouth dropped open. “I do not do a *thing!*”

“Yep, you do,” I said, nodding. He huffed and rolled his eyes, but I ignored him and went on, “Getting back to what happened, though, you got your RA and told them, I’m assuming, that your cartridge was missing, and then what?”

“No, I told her I thought Mark had stolen it,” he said, and it was my turn to be surprised. Murder walk aside, I hadn’t expected him to go so far as creating a direct conflict.

“*Habibi!* You did?” I grinned. “I’m so proud of you!”

Pinkening, he said, “I didn’t *want* to tell on him, but I had to get it back before someone got hurt.”

“You did what you needed to do, then,” I said. “What happened?”

Sighing again, he went on, “She came back to the apartment with me and said she was going to do a health and safety check, which meant she could go into all our rooms and see if there was anything sitting in plain sight. Calvin — and Travis, who was awake by then — looked scared. Mark tried to argue with her, so she called campus security and had them send a guard up to

tell him he had to let her because it's in the residence hall agreement we all signed. The guard stayed with us in the kitchen while she went into their rooms, and she found the cartridge on Mark's desk."

"He just left it laying there?" I asked. The kid was stupider than I'd thought, in that case.

Seb shook his head, though. "He tried to hide it in his pen cup, but she saw it. Then, under their beds and in Travis and Adam's room, she found empty beer bottles. And they're all underage — Travis is only 17."

There was a knock on my door. "Hold that thought, babe," I said, going to ask whoever it was to come back later.

When I opened it, Platt was standing there, biting his bottom lip. "I need to talk to you," he said.

I hesitated, not wanting to discourage him from coming to me. "Sure, of course, but can it wait until study period?" I asked. "I'm talking to my fiancé."

In a low voice, he said, "That's who I need to talk to you about."

"Seb?"

He nodded. "I emailed him last night, like you suggested, and his response was... strange."

My eyebrows drew together. "Strange how? Oh! Oh, wait, did he write back to you last night, too?"

"Early this morning," he said, with a confused look.

"Yeah, that was... Well, come in, let me see if he wants to explain." I stood back and waited for him to enter before shutting the door behind him and returning to sit at my desk. Platt stayed just by the doorway, out of range of the webcam. "Babe," I said, "Platt's here, and he's a bit concerned about an email you sent him?"

Seb slapped both his hands over his mouth. Through them, he said, "Oh *merde*, I forgot about that."

I started laughing. "What did you say?"

The part of his face I could see went pink again. "A lot of nonsense. Can I— he's there? I... I need to tell him what happened, don't I?"

Shrugging, I said, "Up to you."

He thought a moment, and then lowered his hands and nodded. “Where is he?”

I looked over my shoulder at the kid, who was watching me and the computer with equal caution. “C’mere, he wants to be able to see you. Pull up JJ’s chair.”

He obeyed, sitting down next to me and staring at Seb’s image on the screen.

“I’m sorry,” said Seb. “I didn’t mean to worry you about me. When I wrote that, I wasn’t myself. It’s a long story, but I’m okay now.”

“And I haven’t heard the end of the story yet,” I said, kicking my foot out under the desk to get more comfortable. “Would you mind retelling it to both of us, babe? I think it would help make Platt feel better.” The kid was still looking skeptical about Seb’s sanity and sobriety.

After a moment, Seb asked, “Zain told you I have diabetes?”

Platt nodded.

“Okay, well, yesterday my blood sugar went really low.”

He explained about eating the cookie and finding out later what was in it, and said, “So I was high when I wrote that to you. I never should have replied in that state, though. I’m sorry.”

“I thought you were drunk,” Platt said, the first words he’d spoken since coming into the room. His voice was quiet and almost ashamed.

“Yeah,” said Seb, “I understand how you might think that, but I don’t drink. Or get high, usually.”

I saw Platt’s shoulders relax as he said, “I’d be pissed if my roommate did that to me.”

“Seb *did* get pissed,” I said, grinning. “He did this thing he does—”

“I do *not*.”

“—called a murder walk — well, I call it that, anyway — where he looks like a magnificent, deadly assassin on a mission—”

“I do not have a murder walk!” Seb insisted, louder. “I’m a pacifist! I’m a vegetarian!”

“I know, I think that’s part of what makes the murder walk so hot,” I told him, and he just sputtered for a moment.

“I— I don’t—!” His nose scrunched up as he huffed. “Platt, would you *hit* him for me?”

“Ha! You see?” I said. “Violent tendencies right there.”

Seb crossed his arms over his chest and scowled. “Oh, shut up, *everyone* has violent tendencies around you.”

Laughing, I glanced at Platt. The kid’s eyes were narrowed and bouncing between Seb and I like we were playing tennis. “...You let him talk to you that way?” he asked me.

I tilted my head a little and frowned in puzzlement. “Yes?”

“I— I have to go.”

The door shut behind him before I could ask why or even attempt to stop him. I stared at it a moment and then asked, “What was *that* about?”

Sounding like he’d just come to a new understanding, Seb said, “I think he’s thinking in terms of you being a dom and me being a sub.”

Oh. That made sense, but it also pointed to some basic misconceptions. Did Platt believe a dom would *never* let their sub act that way? No wonder he was so scared of the whole thing.

“Were you able to bring up that subject at all in your email?” I asked Seb, and he shook his head.

“Not really.”

I sighed, wishing I could just point the kid to some decent informational websites and then sit him down to answer any questions he had. *One problem at a time*, I reminded myself.

“We can worry about that later,” I said. “I still wanna know the the end of the story. What happened after she found the insulin and beer bottles and pot — wait, *did* she find the pot?”

“No, but she found a bong,” Seb said. “She and the security guard took all of us — Mark, Calvin, Travis, Adam, and me — up to the residence hall director’s office, and they asked us about what happened. It took forever. Mark told them about the cookie, and he tried to say I ate it on purpose, but Calvin actually stood up for me and gave them the truth.”

“That’s good,” I said, surprised that he’d take Seb’s side against his friend’s, and not a little angry at Mark. “Did they believe you?”

“Yeah, because it was two against one. Then they brought us each into a separate room, and we had to write statements, which also took forever. I didn’t see them after that. The Director spoke to me again and said they’d let Adam go because we’d all agreed he wasn’t around to witness anything, but I don’t know where the other three were. He also asked me if I wanted a different room assignment. I said yes—”

“Hallelujah,” I cut in.

“Yeah, but he said it would take a couple of days, because they don’t have any empty beds, so they’d need to find someone willing to switch with me.”

“Seb, you are *not* staying with them for one night more,” I said, seriously. My hand was already reaching for my phone to call his parents.

“I know,” he said. “That’s why I’m here.”

I blinked. I’d actually completely forgotten he was sitting in Quint and Theo’s guest room. “Wait,” I said. “Did you... go to them for help?”

He ducked his head and nodded.

“Babe! I am so proud of you.”

“Don’t be too proud,” he muttered. “I stood outside the building for ten minutes trying to work up the courage to ring the bell, until the front desk guy recognized me and called up to them thinking they were expecting me. And then when they came down and I saw them in the lobby, I almost left. Quint... kinda had to chase me down the street.”

My lips twitched at the image. “Still,” I said, “you reported your roommates *and* you went to find help when you needed it. This calls for a celebration. Where’s Quint? Go get him a minute.”

He sighed in a way that made me suspect he knew what I was planning, but got up and walked out of view for several seconds. When he came back, Quint was with him. The taller man leaned down so I could see his face better. “Seb says he’s told you everything? He’s welcome to stay as long as needed.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I have just one more eensy favor to ask. Could you give him a huge bear-hug for me?”

He turned to look at Seb, who flushed and shrugged a little. Smiling, Quint stepped forward, carefully wrapped his arms around Seb’s back, and pulled him to his chest. Seb was just tall enough to rest his chin on the Top’s broad shoulder. And, after a moment, he returned the embrace.

*

I tried to find Platt after hanging up, but Nak was alone in their room, and shrugged when I asked him where his roommate was. “Sorry, Dad, haven’t seen him since dinner. I’ll let him know you’re looking for him, though.”

“Nah, that’s okay,” I said. “I’ll catch him later.” I didn’t want the kid thinking I was stalking him.

Knowing Seb was with Quint helped me sleep like the dead that night, until JJ woke me by singing the chorus of Thriller under his breath as he got ready. He was doing the dance, too. When he saw me looking down from my rack, he grinned and said, “It’s the first of October, Mo! AKA, the first day of Halloween. Kit-Kat?”

Laughing, I took a mini candy bar from the bag he was holding up. “So I’ve got a full month of this to look forward to?”

“Hey, I tolerate your Disney tunes and pop princesses.”

“That was not a complaint at all,” I told him as I climbed down. I tore open the Kit-Kat with my teeth and shoved the whole thing in my mouth before opening my wardrobe.

It was also the changeover day to wearing our long-sleeved winter working blues uniforms, even though the temperature hadn’t cooled very much from the summer months. I didn’t mind, until it came time for noon meal formation. Our company was always one of the last to march into King Hall, which meant standing out on T-Court for longer, while civilians on tours of the Yard snapped pictures of us.

Not keen to take my place under the hot sun, I found a patch of shade to hang out for the few minutes of loitering around we had before forming up. Most of the mids already there were chatting in small groups. I looked around for Platt. He was usually one of the last to arrive — I suspected because he was avoiding socializing with anyone.

I’d almost given up when I spotted him through the crowd. To my surprise, he wasn’t alone. Both Myrick and Cameron were with him, standing several feet away from anyone else. I moved so I could observe the three of them together, like Seb had asked. Myrick’s back was still to me, yet I could clearly see Cameron and Platt — he with a familiar, sullen set to his shoulders, and she leaning forward as she spoke seriously to him.

Whatever she was saying, Platt seemed to object to it. I was amazed by the kid’s balls, scowling at her like that. Cameron hit him with a delicately arched eyebrow and said something else, and he looked like he’d started to remember who she was. I saw him shift and stand up a little straighter before he replied. He still gave off an air of resentment, though.

It was hard to be sure, but I think Myrick might have told her something then. She sighed and started speaking to Platt again, for longer this time. As she did, his shoulders relaxed and the glower dropped off his face, to be replaced by an expression of growing surprise.

I so wished I could read lips. Maybe if I got a little closer...

Edging through the mids between us, I managed to sneak within a couple of yards of the trio. I stood side-on to Myrick's back, hoping to be mistaken for part of a group of plebes from 8th Company. But the other mids' conversation drowned out whatever Cameron was saying. It was only when they started to move towards their company area for formation that I caught her words.

"—over the summer."

Platt answered her, his voice heavy. "You couldn't have stopped it, ma'am."

"Maybe. Maybe not," Cameron said. "The point is, I want Gould gone, too, before he harms anyone else. We had reason to suspect Mohyeldin might've been doing something about the pair of them, but he refused to talk and was acting very secretive. I needed to be sure."

There was a pause, and then Platt said, slowly, "Ma'am, I was taught that when you do someone wrong, you apologize to them and ask for forgiveness."

Cameron sounded faintly amused as she asked, "Are you telling me to apologize to Mohyeldin, Platt?"

I couldn't help glancing over my shoulder, just in time to see twin spots of pink appear on the kid's cheeks. He shifted again and said, "I'm telling you what my dad taught me, ma'am."

She smiled down at him. "Alright, I will. Are we good now?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Platt.

It was almost time for formation. I walked away before they could spot me, my mind filled with more questions than answers.

The next I saw any of them, it was Cameron, walking along Radford Terrace towards Bancroft after fifth class period that day. I was going in the opposite direction, intent on retrieving the graphing calculator I thought I'd left in the library. As we got into shouting distance, she caught

sight of me and slowed. I think / was what distracted her from seeing Gould coming out of Michelson Hall until he was right in front of her.

Blinking, she took a step back and went to go around him. He blocked her, and then again when she tried going the other way. Her eyes flashed as she snapped out an order at him. Still, Gould stayed where he was for a few seconds. Then he moved to one side and let her pass. Cameron carried her head high and kept her eyes on the boat as she continued on her way. He leered over his shoulder after her, grinning, but I'm sure he couldn't have seen how rattled she looked.

Quickening my pace, I called, "Good afternoon, ma'am. I had a question to ask you about my extra duty on Saturday, if you have a minute?"

"You don't have to lie, Mohyeldin," she said under her breath, coming up next to me.

"Lie, ma'am?" I asked, and she gave me a flat look.

"Do you have a sixth-period class today?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good. Come with me. I need to talk to you."

She led me over the terrace between Michelson and Chauvenet, down the stairs, and to the edge of Ingram Field. As soon as we were out of earshot of anyone else, she said, "I wanted to apologize for calling the hearing. It was unnecessary and unprofessional."

I glanced sideways at her while we kept walking, surprised at how quickly she'd seemed to recover. "It was your prerogative, ma'am," I said.

Sighing, she shook her head. "You're not the type to hold a grudge, I guess."

"Not easily, ma'am," I agreed. I had been upset when I found out the reason for the hearing, but it was over and done with now. Plus, if what I'd just witnessed was any indication, I could see how she might be desperate to know something she could use against Gould.

"I'm the type to," she said, coming to a stop and gazing out towards the Severn River. "When Brian told me before that you and Platt had an encounter with Gould, and neither of you mentioned it, I was annoyed at you. Then I saw you getting out of that cop's car — the same cop Nakamura talked about intervening with Belcher at the picnic — and I thought something else had happened."

"Yeah, I can see how you'd think that," I said. Hesitantly, I went on, "Ma'am, may I ask you what might be a very personal question?"

She turned to face me. "You can ask. We'll see if I answer."

"What did Gould do to you?"

For a moment, she simply looked at me, and I worried I'd overstepped. Then she took her phone out of her pocket, unlocked it, and tapped the screen a few times before showing me an image. It was a vulgar picture of a naked woman's body, with what looked like Cameron's official Academy portrait crudely photoshopped over the head. I was shocked.

"And there's plenty more where that came from," she said, turning the screen off and putting the phone away. "They were emailed to me anonymously last year, every Saturday for months."

"Anonymously?" I asked. "But—"

"Yes, I'm sure it was Gould and Belcher," she said, with a hint of bitterness. "So is Brian. We could just never prove it. The emails stopped coming at the beginning of the summer. The investigation is stalled."

I wanted to say I was sorry, but I didn't see what good that would do. Instead, I said, "Ma'am, I will do everything I can to help get him out of here."

"Thank you," she said. "Make sure you keep watch over Platt, too."

She hardly needed to tell me that, yet I nodded. "Aye aye, ma'am."

"I have to go." She walked away before I could offer to escort her to her destination. I wouldn't have had time to do it anyway, I realized, looking at my watch. I was already going to be late to Marathon Club if I tried to find my calculator beforehand.

I wound up getting it after dinner, and then running back to my room to call Seb. He looked more relaxed and together than I remembered seeing him in a good long while. I grinned happily at him. "Hey, babe! How are— oh my god, there's a dog on the bed behind you!"

Snorting, he said, "Yeah, that's Jagger. I sent you a drawing of him, remember?"

"Yes! Oh, wait, this is the puppy that does tricks? Can I see one?" I asked.

"Um, I don't know if he'll listen to me." He looked over his shoulder at the dog stretched out on the comforter. "Jagger, roll over?"

With a sleepy sort of huff, the dog flopped onto its other side and looked at him for approval. I laughed as Seb rolled his eyes and reached back to pet him.

“Good boy.” To me, he said, “He’s usually more energetic than that. Theo and I just got back from walking him everywhere looking for herbs and stuff for my bath.”

“Hey, I’m not complaining,” I said. “You’ve got a puppy. All I got is him.”

I jerked a thumb over my shoulder at JJ, who glanced up from his computer game and said, “Oh, I see, you don’t *want* my free candy.”

“On second thought, I guess he’s alright, too,” I allowed. “Listen, babe, I’m gonna email you in a bit. Stuff has happened.” I couldn’t fill him in with JJ in the room, but I knew it would help Seb feel better about the whole thing to have a concrete reason for the hearing.

“Okay,” he said. “I might not get it right away, though. I’m having a bath, like I said, and then I need to introduce Theo and Quint to White Collar, because they’ve actually never watched it.”

“*What?* How is that possible?” I asked. It was such a Top/Brat show, I would’ve figured it was required viewing for anyone in a discipline relationship.

“I *know!*”

“Uh... I’ve never watched it either,” JJ said, and of course, Seb and I had to educate him on what he’d been missing, which took most of the rest of the call.

Later, when I finally opened my personal email to write to him, I found a message from Quint waiting.

Re: The Care and Feeding of Sébastien Leon McKenna Crews (Abridged)

Dear Zain,

Seb is settling in fairly well, from what I can see. I remembered what you wrote about major changes being a stressor, and I think this would certainly qualify, so I’m keeping a close eye on him.

Could you elaborate on that point, if possible? What sorts of changes are most likely to upset him? I’ll try to limit those, if I can. Would continuing his old routine help?

*Best regards,
Quint*

I hit the reply button and started to type.

Hi Quint,

Yeah, this would fall under a major change, but it's a good one, I think. I don't know if he told you what the bath he's taking tonight is for? It's a purification thing, shedding unwanted negative energy. It means he's feeling like the issue with the roommates is behind him, and he's moving on.

He has spent a lot of time alone over the past several weeks — probably too much. Having you guys around being sociable all the time might be a tricky adjustment, and he could possibly backslide, especially if he starts feeling like he's intruding on you. That's what I'm most concerned with right now. It would help to... not treat him as a guest, if that makes sense? I know he must've offered to wash dishes or something. Let him. He needs to know he's pulling his own weight.

As for the routine, he needs some quiet time and a bit of room in the morning for yoga and meditation, and he's still supposed to be coloring a mandala design and sending it to me every day, as well as our Skype calls. Between all that and going to the same classes, I think he'll be stable enough. He looked great tonight! :D

Thank you again (you're going to get sick of me saying that...),

Zain

Chapter Seventeen

Flame sparked into life, cobalt and gold, from my match. I held it to the wick of one of the white tealight candles Theo and I had found at the drugstore. Then I waved the match out, dropped it in the wastebasket, and sat in full lotus on the bathmat with my back against the tub, carefully putting the candle down on the tile in front of me. Focusing my gaze on its bright burn, I started to meditate. Not for long. I didn't need to still my mind completely, just enough that I could hold steady to the visualization and the intention behind it.

I imagined a white flame in place of the gold. Pure, luminous white, like a canvas with a fresh coat of gesso or a cloud being hit by the midday sun. Once I had that firmly fixed in my mind, I picked up one of the paper packets next to me and untwisted it to pour some of the contents into my other palm.

It had taken a bit of explaining for Theo to know what kind of herbs I needed. At first, he'd suggested the grocery store, or raiding his own pantry. Those were fine in a pinch, but I wanted something special.

"Um... actually more like... occult-type herbs?" I'd explained, tentatively, and he'd blinked at me from the other side of the table.

"Like Wicca?"

"Kind of." I was relieved he hadn't called it a worse name. "I'm, um, a pagan."

"Oh. Okay. My friend Zeggy used to do that sort of thing. She'd know a place. Let me text her." He reported back while I ate breakfast, "She says there's two stores on the same block up on Ninth Street. One's called Enchantments, and the other's called Flower Power. Do those sound like they'd have what you need?"

They did, and very helpful staff members who suggested a substitute for the lemon leaves I'd wanted.

Now, I held the dried lavender cupped in my hand over the flame, feeling the heat flow through my fingers and visualizing it as light. When it felt like enough time had passed, I brushed the herb into the center of the square of cheesecloth Quint had given me from the kitchen. He hadn't even asked why.

"It's to make a sachet so the cleanup is easier," I'd volunteered as I watched him take it down from the cupboard.

He nodded. "Do you need string to tie it?"

“No, thanks,” I said.

They were both very accommodating. I'd seen Theo examining some books with a skeptical expression while I waited for my herbs to be prepared, yet he was completely willing to help me track down everything, and Quint had the same even-keeled response to this that he'd had to finding me on the street outside with two bags' worth of clothes and textbooks. I needed to find some way to thank them tomorrow.

After making sure every piece of lavender was off my hand, I opened the packet of skullcap and repeated the process. Then I gathered the four corners of the cheesecloth and twisted them together before tying it closed. The finished sachet was about the size of a walnut. I left it to one side as I used my original candle to ignite several more tealights. These I arranged on the corners of the tub, well away from the shower curtain or anything flammable. Standing, I turned the overhead light off and undressed by their flickering glow.

Quint had shown me how the plumbing worked after we ate dinner. I got the water as hot as I could bear it before plugging the drain and picking the sachet up to hold it under the faucet as I knelt on the floor.

When the tub was full enough, I turned the tap off. The sachet floated where I dropped it, bobbing gently, as I opened the bag of epsom salt we'd bought at the drugstore. Taking a handful of salt, I swirled it into the water clockwise, and then again with a second handful. It prickled against my skin as it dissolved.

Slowly, letting my body adjust to the temperature bit by bit, I stepped into the tub and lay down. The steam rising off the water had the earthy, sweet smell of lavender and skullcap. I breathed it deep for a few seconds. Then I closed my eyes and ducked my head under, twisting my legs sideways to make sure every part of me was submerged.

My lungs burned for air before I came back up, gasping and pushing my sopping bangs off my forehead. Blood pulsed beneath my skin, brought close to the surface by the heat. I let myself feel it as I relaxed my whole body and floated.

Ages later, I scooped up the sachet and bent forward to reach my toes. Wherever I felt lingering tension or negativity, I massaged myself with my hands and the sachet, working gradually upward. I made sure to be very thorough. By the time I was running my fingers over my scalp, the water had cooled considerably, but I didn't rush it. Only when I was filled with nothing but peace and white light did I open the drain and climb out.

I extinguished the candles by sprinkling some of the remaining bathwater on them, before using the large, fluffy towel Quint had given me to dry off and dressing in the pajamas I'd laid out on

the counter. The damp sachet, I put into my pocket. Then I dropped the towel and my dirty clothes in the hamper and went out to the living room.

“There are candles cooling on the side of the tub,” I said.

Quint looked over the back of the couch and smiled at me. “That’s fine, they can stay there. Did you have a nice bath?”

“Yes, thank you.” I walked around towards the chair, and saw Theo’s feet hanging over the arm of the couch. He was laying on his side with his head resting on his husband’s thigh, Quint’s fingers brushing through his hair. Jagger stretched out under the coffee table.

Then Theo straightened up, put his feet on the floor, and patted the cushion next to him. “No, sit here,” he said.

I hesitated. I didn’t want to interfere with their closeness.

He leaned over to grab my hand and pull on it, adding, “I found White Collar on Netflix. It’s easier to share snacks if you’re closer.”

So I sat, curling my legs up under me and sneaking a glance at Quint to check for any signs that he minded me being there. He only smiled, before rising and going to the kitchen.

“This kinda feels like a sleepover, doesn’t it?” Theo asked me, grinning. “Takes me back to my childhood.”

I had very limited experience with sleepovers. I could remember tagging along with Dax on a few of his, and some with all four of us staying over with our cousins, but I’d never been close enough to another kid outside my family to want to spend the night alone at their house. Until Zain, and then, of course, he moved in with me. That had been different, though.

“Yeah,” I said, because I imagined this might be what a sleepover with a friend would have felt like. It was fun.

I got my kit and took enough insulin to cover a serving of popcorn, and Quint gave me a glass of skim milk to drink with it, which would help prevent a spike of blood sugar. We watched the pilot episode, with Quint and I sitting closely on either side of Theo so we could eat from the bowl in his lap. The Top’s arm was long enough to reach across Theo’s shoulders. When he rested his hand lightly on my back, I didn’t tense up at all.

Theo kept up a running commentary as we watched. A few of his observations made me laugh so hard he had to pause it so he wouldn’t miss anything. As it ended, he said, “That was great! Let’s start the next one.”

“Tomorrow,” Quint said, turning the TV off. “It’s ten o’clock.”

“Seb’s here, though,” Theo protested, and Quint raised an eyebrow at him.

“Seb being here changes nothing about our rules,” he said. “There are no screens on for the hour before bed. You can find something else with which to occupy yourself.”

“But Quint!”

“Or I can give you a task to do, if you’d like,” suggested the Top.

“No, thank you,” Theo said, testily.

There was a moment of silence, and then Quint said, “Would you come with me, please, Theodore William?”

My stomach clenched, even knowing it wasn’t directed at me. I couldn’t watch them. My gaze dropped to my lap as they both got up, Theo with more reluctance, and moved to the kitchen. Their voices were too low to make out the words, and I wasn’t trying to overhear, anyway.

By contrast, the swat seemed incredibly loud.

My head whipped around without conscious thought, to see Theo’s ears had gone bright red, and he was rubbing his butt behind the counter while Quint continued speaking to him. Whatever he said, it made Theo bow his head, relax his shoulders, and nod. Stepping forward, Quint reached out to tip his chin up and pressed a short kiss to his mouth. I looked away again.

“I’m sorry, Seb,” Theo said, coming back. “I shouldn’t’ve caused a scene and made you uncomfortable.”

I said, “It’s okay,” although my heart was still beating oddly. Not so much in apprehension, now, as in longing. I knew from personal experience the kind of closeness you feel after something like that. It made me miss Zain acutely.

Theo sat down on the couch again and patted his lap, and Jagger jumped up into it. “So, no screens for the rest of the night. Do you wanna play cards?”

“Um, actually, I have to do something for Zain,” I admitted. He hadn’t said anything about me not sending him a mandala for two days, and I knew he was being lenient because of the circumstances, yet I didn’t feel right having not colored one in so long.

“Oh, okay,” Theo said. “I know how that is. I’ll just play with Jag, then.”

I got my tin of colored pencils and book from my bag, moved to the armchair, and selected a design.

Almost immediately, I noticed Theo had stopped giving Jagger commands for tricks and was looking curiously at what I was doing.

"It's a mandala," I said, turning the book to show him.

"That's what you have to do for Zain?" he asked, bemused. "Color? Why?"

I flushed. It did seem quite ridiculous. Before I could think of a way to explain, Quint was saying, "Angel, let him be. It isn't any of your business."

Theo sighed, but he went back to playing with the dog as I continued coloring. From the kitchen, Quint watched us both for a few seconds and then started wiping down the counters again.

I took the finished mandala into the guest room so I could snap a picture of it and text it to Zain. Just after I sent it, I got a notification for a new email. From B. Platt.

I thought I must've misread at first. After the way I'd responded to his last one, and how he'd left in the middle of my Skype call with Zain yesterday, why would he ever want to talk to me again? It was his name, though, and with nothing in the subject line, the same as before. I sat down on the edge of the bed and opened it.

This is Platt again. I wanted to apologize for thinking you were drunk when you wrote to me. I jumped to the wrong conclusion. Have you reported your roommates to anyone? You shouldn't have to live in a chaotic environment like that.

You asked why I was angry with you when I thought Mohyeldin was abusing you. I don't know. I don't understand how you can let him treat you that way, and then speak to him the way you did yesterday. I'm so confused.

I don't meditate. I pray a lot, but my prayers never seem to be answered. Would meditating work better?

My heart ached with compassion for him. He sounded lost. Guiding anyone isn't what I'm good at, but I needed to try.

It took awhile for me to arrange all my jumbled thoughts in order. I had to force myself to be more frank than was comfortable, without the aid of marijuana relaxing my inhibitions. If I wasn't

clear on this, I could wind up only making it worse. I deleted and retyped whole paragraphs before I was satisfied with my response.

Dear Platt,

You don't need to apologize for thinking I was drunk. I would've thought the same thing, and I'm glad you went to Zain about it.

Yes, I reported my roommates, though for a different situation, not that. I'm staying with some friends of mine now. It's very peaceful here, so I'm okay.

About Zain and I, I want to try to explain, because I think it would help you.

Zain is my dom. That sounds simple, but that word means so many different things. I think every person or couple that uses it has a unique definition. So I'll give you ours. For us, it means that in certain circumstances, I enjoy giving him more control than usual, and he enjoys holding it for a time. It's only about control. Some people like to play with pain, too, and that's fine for them. I'm not a masochist, though.

I don't give him all the control, either. That's why we have a safeword. Do you know what that is? It's a signal you can use to make whatever's happening stop. It doesn't have to be a word. Zain can also check in with me by squeezing my hand twice, and I squeeze twice back for 'everything's ok' or just once for 'something's wrong.' Because of my diabetes, I have to safeword if my blood sugar is getting low. Zain always listens to my safeword. Always. So, really, I'm the one in control of everything, even if I'm restrained.

For some people, having a dom also means you have to be deferential to them constantly, 24/7. I think that's what you were thinking of, and why you were confused? But we're not like that. We don't always exchange control in this way, and Zain doesn't want me to bite my tongue around him and capitalize any pronoun that refers to him, like you see some subs doing. It might be what makes them happy, but it doesn't us. Part of the whole idea is me not being respectful. That can create a lot of fun.

I hope my saying all this doesn't freak you out. If you want to ignore it, go ahead. I won't mention it again unless you do. But I'm here, if you have questions. I know this can be scary.

You asked about meditation working better than prayer. I do both, for different reasons. With prayer, you're looking for an answer from something higher than yourself (or I am, anyway), but with meditation, the only answers can come from you. Maybe a deeper level of 'you' than you've ever experienced directly, yet it's still you, at your core. So I guess it would depend what your question is, and what kind of answer you want.

Seb Crews

I read it over again, blushing hard at some parts. Maybe I should just scrap the whole thing.

“Seb?”

The dog tags fell from my mouth as I looked up and saw Quint standing in the doorway. He smiled at me briefly.

“I know Zain doesn’t have a similar rule for you, but you would be doing me a favor if you avoided using electronics in the hour before bed as well,” he said. “At least while you’re staying here, and Theo can see you.”

“Oh!” I said. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to. I wasn’t thinking—”

“Seb,” he said, smiling again. “It’s alright. You aren’t in trouble.”

I still couldn’t help feeling like I’d been rude. Quickly, I sent the email and locked my phone before dropping it into my bag. “There. Done, I promise.”

“Thank you.” He came in and sat down next to me. “I also wanted to talk to you about the interviews with the endos I arranged for tomorrow.”

I blinked. With all that had happened, I’d completely forgotten about that.

Quint went on, “I will be working at the hospital beforehand, so I’ll need to meet you there. Have you ever ridden the subway?”

I shook my head. It seemed too intimidating for me to try, even to go to the art museums.

“Okay, I think it’s best if Theo brings you uptown, then. Would that be alright?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Good. I’ll let him know.” With a pat on my knee, he started to get up.

“This is just interviews though, right?” I asked, and he stopped, settled back on the bed, and looked closer at me. I tried not to fidget.

“Yes, it’s just interviews,” he said. “There won’t be an exam. How are you feeling?”

“I’m—” I bit my tongue before I could say ‘fine’, and blew out a breath. “Um, nervous,” I finished, “but knowing there’s no exam helps, so I’ll be okay. You don’t need to worry.”

“Hmm.” That was all he said for a moment, and my fingers twisted in the hem of my shirt. Then he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and hugged me to his side. “It’ll be alright, *mon chaton*,” he said. “I want you to try getting some sleep, and if you have trouble, come and wake me. Understand?”

I couldn’t imagine disturbing him, but I nodded. “*Oui, monsieur.*”⁵

The apartment was perfectly quiet as I sat in full-lotus on the bed, using the pillow, folded over, to raise my hips higher than my knees. It was an okay substitute, but I did wish I’d had room in my duffle bag to bring my zafu — the small, round, buckwheat cushion used to maintain proper posture — and maybe my yoga mat, too. Quint had said I wasn’t allowed to go back to the dorm to get anything without him, though, and I couldn’t ask him.

I heard him come in from his run as I started on my yoga. For a second, I almost imagined the footsteps belonged to Zain.

They stopped just outside the guest room door, and there was a barely-audible knock. Straightening out of warrior pose, I went to answer it.

“Good morning,” Quint said. “I’m sorry, did I interrupt?”

“I was almost done,” I told him, lowering my voice like he was.

“I won’t keep you long. Did you sleep well?”

I nodded. Well enough that getting him up hadn’t been necessary, anyway. I’d woken a couple of times, but quickly dropped off again with the use of some breathing exercises.

“Good,” he said. “I wanted to let you know the plan for today. Theo will be here when you come back for lunch, and he’ll meet you outside your class building this afternoon to take you uptown, where I’ll be waiting. The appointment is at three. You’ll be meeting with Dr. Gregg first, and then Dr. Altavilla. It should take about twenty minutes for each of them. Afterward, we’ll come back here together. Do you have any questions?”

Shaking my head, I said, “Thank you,” because it does help to have an outline of what’s going to happen when I’m anxious about it.

“Alright. I need to go get ready for work. You have my number. If you need me, call. No matter how small you believe the issue is, or what I might be doing. Is that clear?”

⁵ The extra [Power and Enchantment](#) goes here.

“Yes. I’ll be fine, though,” I said.

He paused, and then said, “I think I need to talk with Zain about banishing that word from your vocabulary.” My stomach flipped over and my cheeks flushed. After a moment, Quint continued, softly yet firmly, “I’m not saying that you’ll need help, *mon chaton*, but if you do and I don’t find out about it until later, I am not going to be pleased. Understand?”

“*Oui, monsieur*,” I said, my head bowed.

He didn’t ask me to look him in the eyes, just squeezed my shoulder with one hand and said, “*Merci*. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

I nodded and waited for him to go into his and Theo’s bedroom before shutting the door.

Theo was still sleeping as I went to class about half an hour later. When I came back for lunch, getting waved through the lobby by the front desk guy, I found him in pajamas. “I’ve been lazing around all morning,” he told me while we ate. “Thinking about the next step in my career, without my band.”

“Do you want to form another one?” I asked, and he shook his head.

“I don’t want to put myself through that again. Once bitten, twice shy, y’know? Flying solo seems like the best option at the moment. It’s so much more work, though, because you’re doing everything yourself. And I want to capitalize on the small fan base the Upstart Crows had, but also make it clear that I’m my own artist, which means almost complete reinvention. New style, new songs, new website, new cover art, new merch at some point...” He blew out a breath. “It’s a lot.”

I knew next to nothing about the music industry, so I just nodded, unsure what to say or how I might help. That reminded me, though, of wanting to do something for him and Quint to show my appreciation. “Um, would you guys mind if I took care of dinner tonight?” I asked.

Theo grinned and said, “Well, it’s my turn to cook again, so no, we wouldn’t mind at all.”

Laughing, I said, “Okay, good.”

Now I needed to figure out what to make.

I thought about it all through my art history class, jotting down ideas in the corner of my paper between taking notes. Nothing seemed special enough to thank them properly. Maybe I needed to come up with something else to do, too.

Theo met me on the sidewalk, just like Quint had said. He was studying the residence hall across the street, and he spoke to me with barely a glance away from it. "Do you run into your former roommates in classes?"

I shook my head. "None of them are art students, so we don't have any in common."

"Would they be at the dorm right now?"

With a frown, I said, "I'm not sure. Why?"

"Oh, nothing, I was just thinking," he said, casually tucking his hands into his pockets. "If you left anything you need, I could go up and get it for you."

I bit my lip. "Um. That's okay, I don't need anything."

He smiled and rolled his eyes sideways at me. "Yeah, I know, Quint said you can't go back alone, but you wouldn't be, I would. You could stay down here."

"No, I couldn't," I said, apologetic. "All visitors have to be escorted. And anyway, Quint said *he* had to go with me, remember?"

Sighing ruefully, he replied, "Your memory must be better than mine. Alright, I guess I won't get a shot at telling your roommates what I think of them. C'mon, let's head up to the hospital."

Oh.

"Sorry," I said, following him.

"S'alright," he said. "You probably saved us both a lot of trouble. I like to fool myself into believing Quint won't find out, but I'm usually wrong."

I couldn't think of a way to ask him about the 'usually' part of that without seeming nosy, so I stayed quiet as we walked to the subway station and he led me down the stairs.

It was loud down there, and grimey. The rumbling of passing trains echoed back and forth and made it so he had to raise his voice as he handed me a fare card and told me how to swipe it through the turnstile. It took me two tries.

I stuck close to him for the whole trip, which lasted about forty minutes and included a confusing transfer midway through. Theo tried to explain how to follow all the signs hanging from the

ceiling, but about the only thing I understood was 'uptown' and 'downtown', and sometimes they didn't even say that. We arrived well before my appointment, though, and Quint was standing right at the top of the stairs, holding a briefcase, as we finally made our way aboveground again. Theo clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Delivery for Dr. Hanniford!"

"Thank you, angel," said Quint.

"What, I don't get a tip?" he asked, and then stood on his toes to kiss his husband.

Quint was smiling when he let go. "Alright," he said, "your services are no longer needed. Go home and start thinking about dinner."

"Seb's making dinner tonight," Theo said, and when Quint quirked an eyebrow at him, he quickly added, "He asked me if he could!"

"I did," I said. "I want to."

The Top scrutinized me a moment and then said, "Well, I look forward to it, Seb. Thank you. Now, we should be going."

"Good luck," Theo said, giving me a brief hug before he went into the subway station again.

Quint took me to a building just down the street, saying "This is the Diabetes Center."

The whole thing? It looked huge, and intimidating. My heart was tripping over itself by the time we made it through a maze of hallways inside and found the correct waiting room. The receptionist smiled pleasantly as she told us the doctor would be out soon, but it didn't help.

I dropped down into a chair between the wall and a table full of magazines. Picking one up, I started flipping through it while Quint took a seat across from me. *Stop it*, I thought. *You've been to a hundred endo appointments since you were diagnosed. They aren't even doing an exam. Stop freaking out!*

"Seb, come here and sit next to me, please."

I looked at him through my eyelashes. That was the voice he'd used when he told me to do my test at the table, not in the bathroom. *Here?* I thought, shifting my weight on the cushion and glancing from him, to the receptionist, to the empty chair beside him. "I'm fine."

He dropped his chin, which made his raised brows seem even higher, and I was moving involuntarily before I knew it.

At least now my back was to the receptionist, so she couldn't see my red face. Quint put his arm around my shoulders. The solidness of it was comforting and real, yet I tensed up.

This was the point where Zain probably would've started looking for an out-of-the-way restroom to deliver a spanking. Knowing that made me squirm under Quint's hold. If I ran, I could maybe make it to the elevators before—

“Sébastien Leon, stop.”

I went utterly still at the quiet order delivered directly into my ear.

He continued speaking in that low, calm tone. “It's okay to be anxious. It's natural, after what happened the last time, that you would be. However, the only way you're going to move past this anxiety is by allowing yourself to feel it, not running away and hiding from it. I do not intend to chase you or talk you down from a tree again. No, you're safe. Keep your feet on the floor, please.”

I hadn't even realized I'd started to pull my knees up to my chest. Slowly, I lowered them again. “Sorry,” I whispered.

“I'm not angry or upset with you, *mon chaton*,” he said, “You have nothing to be sorry for. I know this is difficult. Zain asked me to be here to help, remember?”

Yes, although I seemed to recall Zain being more worried about my state of mind *after* the appointment than before. Or did Quint mean the entire arrangement in general?

Regardless, he was right.

“Crews?” a voice called from behind me, and Quint's grip tightened on my shoulder as I jumped.

“Would you like me to go in with you?” he asked.

Gulping, I nodded.

“Alright. *Allons-y*.”

Dr. Gregg was an older gentleman with a neatly-trimmed silver goatee, and Dr. Altavilla was a curly-haired brunette in her forties. They both greeted Quint and I with equal warmth. The interviews were nearly identical, in fact, except that I was trying to hide how my hands were shaking at the beginning of the first one, with Dr. Gregg.

Before even touching on diabetes, they each asked about my personal history, and when the subject of insulin pumps inevitably came up, I was able to tell them I wanted to stay on the pen. Throughout it, Quint didn't say much, yet he kept lightly touching my knee or shoulder every so often, as though he was just reminding me of his presence.

All three of them agreed I was underweight. I've always been skinny, but running on the high side with my sugar levels nearly constantly was making me shed pounds as quickly as I gained them back. Zain was not going to be happy about being able to count my ribs when I went to see him over Columbus Day weekend.

Dr. Gregg suggested I see a nutritionist about my diet, while Dr. Altavilla said, "In order to fix this, we need to address the cause of the hyperglycemia. From what you've told me, you're going through a lot of stressful life changes all at once. If you became my patient, one of the first things I'd like to do is schedule a few sessions with our staff psychologist so you can come up with coping mechanisms that would work for you. How would you feel about that?"

I took a deep breath and said, "Yeah, that would be good. Seeing a psychologist and being your patient, I mean."

She smiled. "Excellent. Now we get to the fun part: paperwork."

I filled out a couple of forms, and then she told me they would be in touch to schedule my next appointments. Stepping into the street again next to Quint, I said, "*Merci*. It was, um, a lot easier this time."

"You're very welcome," he said, "and I'm glad you're feeling better."

He led me back into the subway, but when I started towards the staircase marked for downtown trains, his hand on my elbow stopped me. "We're going uptown?" I asked, confused, and he smiled.

"Yes. I'd like to show you something."

So I followed him to the other platform, biting my tongue on my curiosity.

It was only a few stops and a short walk away and it was... *stupéfiant*. I sat on a small boulder, staring.

The forest was so dense around me that no buildings were visible, and so quiet that, except for an occasional plane passing overhead, I could almost forget we were in Manhattan.

Autumn was just starting to turn the leaves. Patches of scarlet and goldenrod stood out against the unbelievable greenness, and all of it rustled with life. It smelled like *earth*, not city. I closed my eyes a moment and felt the breeze caressing my skin.

“Quint, this is...”

“I thought you might like it,” he said, from where he was standing a few feet down the trail. “I come here to run sometimes, when I’m on a long shift at the hospital.”

“I *love* it,” I said, and my voice was thick. “What’s it called?”

“Inwood Hill Park. It’s the only large piece of Manhattan that has been left undeveloped since Colonial times. The weekends are more crowded, but during the week, it’s a great place to relax.” With a twinkle of humor, he added, “That does not mean climbing trees.”

I laughed and wiped a tear off my cheek. “No, I won’t. I promise.”

“Good.”

Tipping my head back, I watched a bird of prey — a red-tailed hawk, I thought — fly across the azure sky. My fingers itched to paint.

Chapter Eighteen

I'd let Seb slide on the coloring for a couple of days while he recovered from being drugged and dealt with his roommates. Quint's email about major changes had me rethinking that. Perhaps it was a mistake to allow him to slip out of the small routine, especially without discussing it. The fact that he sent me a mandala late Thursday night without being prompted made me suspect he felt the same way.

The dom/sub stuff had also gotten moved to the back burner over the past week, and while that wasn't as big a deal, I did want to put it on his mind again. I had *plans* for his Columbus Day Weekend visit. He needed to be primed and ready. So after JJ left for choir rehearsal on Friday (singing "Monster Mash" under his breath), I settled down to Skype with an idea of surprising my boy by letting out the dominance.

He surprised me first, though, when I saw Quint sitting next to him.

"Oh. Hi!" I said.

"Hello, Zain," said Quint. "I won't be here long. There's a small matter I wanted to discuss with both of you, and Seb graciously agreed to allow me to use this time, if that's alright?"

"Sure," I said, looking curiously at Seb, who was fiddling with his medical ID bracelet with his head bowed. "What's up?"

"Seb, would you like to explain, or--?"

"You can."

Quint nodded and turned to me. "There's a pattern I've noticed where Seb tends to say that he's 'fine' when he isn't. I would consider it lying. Today, for example, as we waited for his interviews with the two endocrinologists, I saw he was showing signs of being nervous, yet when I asked him to come sit next to me, he said 'I'm fine,' and, at first, didn't move."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. Babe, you wanna add anything?"

Looking sideways at Quint from underneath his eyelashes, Seb said, "I don't... *think* of it as lying."

"No, of course not," I said, cheerfully, "because to *you*, 'I'm fine' means something like, 'I'm trying to fool myself into *believing* I'm fine and I really wish you would play along and stop worrying about me so I could continue having this meltdown in peace,' right?"

He made a face at his lap and didn't answer.

To Quint, I said, "That means, 'yes, Zain, you're exactly right and also a genius.' You may want to start jotting these translations down, by the way."

The older man smiled a little and said, "I had suggested perhaps banning 'fine' altogether, so there wouldn't be any confusion with conflicting definitions."

I thought that over. "Yeah, it could work. You'd also have to ban 'okay,' 'alright,' 'd'accord,' and certain instances of 'good,' though. It might be easier to say only strong emotional words can be used to describe a mental state. Things like happy, sad, frustrated, scared. That make sense, babe? And if you're not sure what you're feeling, 'I don't know' is okay, too, but only if you *really* don't know, not to get out of saying it."

Seb looked faintly horrified. I understood why — I had never outright forbidden him from using any of those weaselly answers before, but then, I was able to read what he meant by them. Quint didn't have nearly as much practice. We had to help him.

Glancing from me to Quint, he asked, "What if I forget?"

"Then he gives you a verbal reminder," I said, "although, Quint, let me know if 'forgetting' starts to seem like a habit. At that point, we might work out something else."

Quint nodded.

Seb went pink from his neck to his hairline before he said, "Okay."

"Awesome," I said. "How'd the interviews go, anyway?"

"Fine," Seb answered. I started laughing, and he blushed deeper, huffing at me. "That was a description of the *interviews*, not my mental state."

"Uh-huh."

"It *was!* Quint, tell him."

Smiling again, Quint said, "They did go well, despite the rocky start, and he was relaxed afterward. He decided on Dr. Altavilla, who is a very intelligent and caring woman, and a good fit, I think. They'll be contacting Seb to set up the first counseling session early next week."

"Counseling?" I asked.

Seb nodded. "She said they have a psychologist on staff who could help me adjust to college more and reduce stress."

I tilted my chin at him. "And you just agreed to that right off the bat?"

"Well I couldn't really argue about it after I made *you* go to therapy over the summer," he replied, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, it couldn't hurt to have more options, right?"

"Yeah, true," I said. "I so would've called you out for having a double standard there if you'd refused. Probably you won't be as stressed to begin with now, though." At least, I was hoping so. He appeared infinitely more relaxed just from staying with Quint and Theo. Which reminded me... "What's going on with the roommates? Have you heard anything?"

He shook his head. "The director said they'd contact me if they had any questions or found another dorm for me, but nothing yet. I wish they would, so I could stop imposing."

Quint raised an eyebrow at the last word and said, "You are not imposing, *mon chaton*. I've told you that you can stay here as long as needed, and I did mean it, so I would appreciate if you stopped implying otherwise. Understood?"

I watched in interest as Seb ducked his head and answered, "*Oui, monsieur*."

"Good," Quint said. "With that settled, I'll leave you two alone." He patted Seb on the shoulder as he stood and moved out of frame.

When I heard the door shut behind him, I stopped biting my lip long enough to ask, "Did— did he just call you his kitten?"

"Shut up."

Muffling my laughter with the back of my hand, I said, "I dare you to meow at him next time he does it."

His mouth dropped open. "You are *awful*."

"Aw, c'mon, for me? For an earlier chance at an orgasm when you come see me next weekend?"

"Zain!" he yelped. "Keep your voice down!"

I sighed. "Okay, but I'm telling you now, you're gonna *want* that earlier chance, so consider it. Just one little meow."

“No,” he said, with an expression of high reproach. “He opened his home to me, and I’m having a hard enough time saying thank you for that. Making wild mushroom risotto for dinner tonight doesn’t seem like enough.”

“I’d say that goes a long way towards it,” I said, smiling. I was glad that Quint had taken my advice and let him pitch in around the place. “Your mushroom risotto is amazing. But if you want to do more, why not make them some art?”

He pulled an uncertain face. “Maybe. I use artwork as gifts too often.”

“Babe, I love every single piece of art you’ve ever given me, and I always look forward to more,” I told him, sincerely. “Anyway, *they* don’t have other pieces. Except the one Theo paid you for, which shows they like your work.”

“Yeah. I guess I could do a portrait with both of them together this time?”

“Good idea,” I said, and he got the look he gets when he’s mentally going to a studio. Before I lost him completely, I asked, “Hey, so did you read the email I sent about Cameron and why she called the hearing?”

Nodding, he said, “It was awful what they did to her. I understand now why she could be... overzealous in wanting evidence against them.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “What’d you think of how they were interacting with Platt, though? It seems like he *was* angry at them about the hearing, doesn’t it? Maybe you were right about him having a crush on me?”

He made a noncommittal noise. “I don’t know. He didn’t sound jealous of me in either of his emails, or when he was with you while we Skyped.”

“True,” I said, and then, “Wait, *either* of his emails? When did he email you again?”

“Oh. Yesterday,” he said, blushing for some reason. “To apologize for thinking I was drunk. He sounded concerned about me. He said I shouldn’t have to live in a chaotic environment.”

I blinked, though on some level, it wasn’t that surprising. “Well, he’d know what that’s like.”

Seb’s eyes softened with empathy. “Yeah, I guess he would. I, uh, kind of... told him a little about BDSM in my response? He brought it up. In a really confused way. I tried to explain, but he hasn’t answered me yet, so I don’t know how he reacted. Can you check on him?”

That took me aback more. Seb is not the type to talk frankly about sex, especially with near-strangers. When I suggested he explain submission to Platt, I wasn't expecting it to happen so quickly.

"I'll try," I said. "The earliest I can see him is tomorrow afternoon, I think. The company's being split up for training tomorrow morning, and then I have my three hours of extra duty to complete. He and JJ are going to JJ's sponsor's house while I do that. Could I read these emails?"

He shook his head. "They're private."

Sighing, I said, "Okay," although curiosity was still niggling at me. "I gotta go, babe. Love you."

"*Je t'aime et tu me manque*," he answered, and I smiled at him adding the second part without prodding.

"Miss you, too. Only a week from tomorrow, and you'll be here, remember. I can't wait. Oh! That reminds me." I grinned wickedly. "Until then, my boy, I want you edging twice a day, and see if you can hold it on the edge for at least a few minutes each time. Got it?"

He flushed again. I saw him glance over to the door like he was worried about being overheard, but he said, "Yes, sir."

"Good boy," I praised, and watched him shiver a little. Yep, he would be ready.

I caught glimpses of Platt the next morning during SMT, in the distance, as the sun reflected off his blond hair, which had grown out about an inch from the Plebe Summer buzzcut. He was making good time through the obstacle course. I couldn't tell much other than that, though.

After lunch, everyone else started their liberty and I headed to the Main Office to find out my duty station for my punishment. The upperclassman there handed me a chit and said, "You're on laundry. Report to the basement."

It could've been worse. I'd been dreading getting kitchen duty and spending three hours scrubbing pots. The laundry room was full of steam, and I sweated through my uniform in minutes, but it smelled nice, and pushing around huge canvas bins on wheels was kind of fun. Of course, the upperclassman in charge of me spent most of the time yelling. It was supposed to be a punishment, so I didn't take that personally. When I was done and he signed my chit, he said, "Good work. Enjoy your Saturday," and I cheerfully replied, "Thank you, sir," before shoving off.

I'd barely stepped out the door when my phone buzzed. I took it out of my pocket, expecting a message from Seb, or maybe Quint. Instead, an unfamiliar number appeared, with the text, *This is Platt. Can you come to my room? Need help.*

The last two words froze my heart and made my feet break into a run.

Shit, what if something happened with Gould or Belcher? It had to be serious for him to actually reach out to me like this. And why the hell had he stayed here? I thought he was going with JJ. I should've checked. *Shit shit shit.* My shoes beat out the word against the deck like a mantra as I raced across Bancroft, skidding around corners.

When I finally made it, I had to grab his doorframe to stop myself. Panting, I raised a hand and knocked twice. "Platt! You okay?!"

It cracked open just wide enough for him to glare through. "Not so fucking loud!" he hissed.

He was holding most of his body behind the door, making it impossible to assess how he looked. With the exception of his eyes, which had a reddish tint to them.

"You said you needed help. What's going on?"

His chin quivered for a moment, before he gritted his teeth together and pursed his lips to stop it. A flush was racing over his face, and I saw his gaze dart up and down the hall behind me, like he was checking for anyone else nearby. Only then did he pull the door open farther, still keeping it between us.

"Can you... come in?" he asked, just above a whisper.

I did, and watched him shut it with his back to me. There was something odd in the movement, but I didn't realize what until he finally, at a glacial pace, turned so I could see his hands.

Nylon cord, about half an inch thick, was wrapped around both his wrists and knotted together. I could tell at a glance he wouldn't be able to get out of it on his own.

His eyes glistened, focusing over my shoulder, yet his chin was up and jutting out. "I w—was trying sssomething," he said, "and I g—got stuck."

Oh.

"Okay," I said, with as much calm acceptance as I could pack into two syllables. "And you want me to—?"

He nodded furiously before I even finished the question, holding his hands out to me.

Stepping forward, I took a closer look at the knot. I wasn't sure what kind he'd used, but it had tightened as he pulled against it, and I didn't like how pale his hands were, either. "I'm going to have to touch you to undo this," I said. "Is that okay?"

"Yeah, just get it *off* me," he said, a hint of panic in his voice.

"I will, it's okay. One minute, I promise."

Carefully, I found the ends of the rope and started feeding them back through the loops, loosening each section of the knot as I went and keeping contact to a minimum. When it started to come undone, he tried to yank the rest of the way out. I had to grab his hand to stop him.

"Hold still," I said. "You'll give yourself rope burn. Let me help." My fingers were working as I spoke, unwrapping it from his wrists. "Make that *more* rope burn," I amended, once I caught sight of the skin underneath. It was a mess. His palm was cold, too. I dropped the rope on the floor, and, forgetting about trying not to touch him, guided him by the shoulder to the sink next to his shower. "Here, let me wash that."

"I've got it." He turned on the tap with shaking hands and held both wrists under the stream of water, staring down at them woodenly.

"Can you do this?" I asked, wiggling all my fingers. He imitated me. It looked like he had full range of motion, and the color had improved, too. Good. "Do you have any pain or numbness?"

His head jerked from side to side.

"You sure? Because those could be signs of nerve damage."

"I'm sure. You can go now."

I laughed under my breath, though it wasn't actually funny. "Nope, I'm afraid I can't. Sorry. There's this thing called aftercare. Do you know what that is?"

He didn't answer, but I saw his eyes flick to me in the mirror for an instant, and then down. His chin had gone all wobbly again. I couldn't help reaching out and touching between his shoulder blades.

An instant later, I had an armful of Platt. Not clinging to me, just standing very close, with his cheek pressed against my chest and my hand still on his back.

I hugged him with both arms, gently, so he could get away if he wanted to, and said, "Hey, it's okay. You're alright."

His voice, when he spoke, was choked. "I thought they would go away."

"Thought what would go away?"

"These feelings. You *said* I could be normal if I wanted!" he accused.

Wincing, I remembered the night before Brigade Trials, and telling him if he was vanilla for the rest of his life, it was fine. At the time, I'd meant to simply give him back the control Belcher took against his consent. But you can't turn off the way you're wired. I knew that.

"Oh, kid," I said. "I didn't—" How to explain? "Look, 'normal' is a useless concept. There's nothing *wrong* with the feelings you have. Whether you want to act on them is up to you. Though I think you'll be a lot happier if you accept them and explore them, safely. Is that... what you were trying to do?"

His head moved in what might've been a nod, and he said, "Your fiancé told me he was in control, even if he's restrained, and I thought if I could feel like that, I could. I don't know. Then I couldn't undo it, and I— I was—"

I rubbed his back while he broke down into sobs. "Shhhh, it's okay. I know it had to be scary."

Pulling away from me, he said, "No, you don't understand! I got— at first, I was—" He seemed angry and unable to finish the sentence, but as he wiped away tears from his red face with one hand, he gestured downward, towards his groin, with the other, and I suddenly understood what he meant.

It must've frightened the life out of him in an entirely different way.

"There's nothing wrong with that, either," I said.

"It's sick!" he spat.

"No, it isn't." Choosing my words with great care, I explained, "It's your body's natural reaction, like a reflex. And if... If something like that ever happened to you before, when you didn't want it to, that was just a reflex, too. Look, have you talked to your counselor about this?"

Another jerky shake of the head.

"Okay, well, you should. If not the Academy counselor, than another one."

He chin took on a mutinous set, yet he didn't outright refuse. Instead, he looked down at the marks on his wrists and softly asked, "Will they scar?"

"No, I don't think so," I said. There were abrasions, but no blood. "You should keep the skin moist with Vaseline as it heals, and covered with gauze. Don't pick at the scabs. Also, if you ever decide to do this again—"

"I won't—"

"*If* you ever decide to do this again," I repeated over him, a bit louder and with just the slightest touch of a commanding note, "don't use any kind of knot that slips. Put all that Boy Scout knowledge to use, alright? And never, *ever* let anything go around your neck."

Frowning, he asked, "Why *would* I?"

I had to laugh. "Oh, good, that's one less thing for me to be worried about. Do you have Vaseline and gauze?"

"No."

"I do. C'mon, I'll get you patched up and then we can watch *The Lion King*," I said, already heading for the door. As I opened it, I looked back and saw him pulling the sleeves of his uniform down over his wrists, watching me cautiously. With my easiest smile, I added, "I've got it on my computer. It's your favorite, right? We have nothing else to do."

And it would give me an excuse to stay close so I could keep an eye on him while he calmed down.

After a moment, he nodded. I exhaled and led him out.

Chapter Nineteen

Saturday dawned with a grey, overcast sky and a chill in the air that made getting up to do yoga very unappealing. I knew if I didn't, though, I'd feel off all day and likely have high blood sugar. The grounding of it, the connection to my body and its rhythms, and the quiet meditation that follows are all essential to me. So I traded the warmth of the knit comforter for a light hoodie pulled on over my pajamas before I started.

In the middle of a sequence of reclining poses, I caught an upside-down glimpse of Theo, standing in the doorway with his head tilted in curiosity. Untwisting myself enough to look at him, I said, "Good morning."

"Isn't that uncomfortable to do on the floor?" he asked. "Shouldn't you have a mat or something?"

"I'm okay," I said, before remembering Zain's appalling new rule about statements like that. But it was a description of my *physical* state, not mental, I reasoned, and Quint was still out on his run, anyway.

"You're making pretzel shapes on bare hardwood, though," said Theo. "Here, why don't we just move the rug?"

Before I could stop him, he was pushing the office chair out of the way. I got to my feet to make room, protesting, "No, really, you don't need to—"

"It'll only take a second," he said, going to one corner of the desk. "Grab the other side and we'll both lift up at the same time, and then I'll slide it with my— oh, wait."

As he crouched down and flipped the edge of the rug over, I heard the front door opening to let Quint in. "Theo..." I said, weakly, trying to think how to get him to stop.

He didn't hear me. "Yeah, it's non-skid, so that won't work." Straightening, he called, "Quint? Can you give us a hand?"

Merde.

My heart skipped at the first shadow to appear in the hall, but it was just Jagger, who stopped to sniff the chair that had been pushed out of place. Then Quint's much longer shadow followed, growing darker and darker, until he was in the doorway, frowning. He only glanced at Theo before transferring the look to where I was standing with my arms crossed over my stomach. "What are you two doing?"

“Moving the rug out farther so Seb can use it as a yoga mat,” Theo said. “Can you help me lift the front legs of the desk, and then Seb, you can pull it out?”

The Top’s eyebrows went up, slowly. “You don’t have a yoga mat?” he asked me.

I shifted my weight to my other foot and told him, “It isn’t necessary.”

Theo seemed to have realized something was going on, finally, though he still seemed confused as he glanced back and forth between us. I felt my face heating up under both their scrutiny.

“Whether it’s necessary is not what I asked, young man,” Quint said, and I wished I could take refuge in the wardrobe behind me. “Do you possess a yoga mat?”

“...Yes?” I replied, to my toes.

“Look at me and tell me where it is, please.”

I hugged myself so tight I could swear I felt my stomach’s somersaults through my skin. He’d moved a few steps closer when I finally raised my eyes, and was leaning on the edge of the desk, next to Theo. Gulping, I said, “It’s in my dorm.”

Quint nodded, unsurprised. “As I recall, I never, in so many words, *asked* you if there was anything you’d like from your dorm, which I see was a mistake, so I’m asking you now. You will notice I said *‘like,’* not *‘need.’*”

“Um... my meditation cushion?” I offered. “And the— the mat, I guess.”

“Anything else?”

Shaking my head, I said, “*Non, monsieur,* not that I can think of.”

“Alright. We’ll go to get them after breakfast,” he said, with as much certainty as if it was already done. “Have you completed your yoga session?”

I shook my head again.

“Finish up, please.” Pushing himself off the desk, he walked out the door, snapping his fingers at Jagger to follow him.

Theo stayed behind. “I’m sorry,” he said, quietly. “I never thought that would get you in trouble.”

“It’s okay,” I told him. “It was my fault for not mentioning them sooner.”

With a frown, he asked, "Yeah, why didn't you just say--?"

"Angel, come set the table, please," Quint's voice interrupted.

"Just a sec," he called back.

"Now, please."

Theo made a long-suffering face at me before he went out, though I was glad. It saved me from answering his unfinished question. I shut the door behind him, rubbing away a phantom feeling of stinging on my bottom as I lowered myself to the floor again.

Breakfast was veggie omelettes with toast and, for Quint and Theo, sausage. All three of us were quiet as we ate. Quint didn't usually say much unless he had something to add, but Theo's reticence was out of the norm. He kept his eyes on his plate for most of the meal, looking deep in thought.

As for me, I was thinking, too — about the possibility of seeing my roommates at the dorm. We'd parted barely speaking to each other. I didn't know what had happened with them since then, or how angry they might be still. The potential for conflict made me want to hide, yet I couldn't. Quint was keeping close watch on me.

When I started to take my empty dishes to the sink, he plucked them from my hands and said, "Those can wait. Go get dressed quickly, please. I want to try to retrieve your things before the rain starts."

Then Theo spoke, for the first time since sitting down, to ask him, "Can I come? Seb might find more stuff he wants than you could carry back in one trip."

Shaking my head, I said, "It's only the mat and zafu, I swear."

"Get dressed, please," Quint repeated to me. To his husband, he answered, in a firmer tone, "Yes, you may. However, if we meet the roommates, you will not engage with them. Am I clear?"

Right away, Theo said, "Yes, sir. I'll get dressed too," and stood up to go towards the bedroom with such speed I suspected he was trying to do it before Quint changed his mind. I followed him down the hallway at a slower pace.

*

The RA on security desk duty examined both of their IDs and had them sign the logbook before letting us into the elevator. If I was the subject of gossip among the residence life staff over the stolen insulin, she didn't show it.

I watched the red numbers on the floor display count upward with my heart in my throat. Next to me, Quint reached out and rested his hand on my shoulder. I blushed, knowing my fear must've been so plain on my face that a five-year-old could depict it with fingerpaints.

When the doors slid apart, I took a deep breath before stepping off, with Quint to my right and Theo on my left. "It's— it's that one," I said, pointing to the apartment entrance. It was wide open. The sound of Mark and Calvin's favorite video game carried clearly to where we stood.

"Okay," Quint said. "This should only take a few minutes. Are you ready?"

I nodded, and, bracing myself to be yelled at, walked in.

Calvin sat alone on the loveseat in the common room, gripping the game controller tightly in both hands. He glanced up from the TV screen for a split second and then did a double-take, pressing a button that halted most of the noise. "What are *you* doing here?" he asked, halfway between puzzled and hostile.

"Um, I— um..."

Theo interjected, coolly saying, "We're picking up Seb's stuff, assuming you haven't stolen any more of it."

"I didn't steal anything!" Calvin said, dropping the controller as he shifted his weight to get up. "And if he *told* you that—"

"No!" I held up both hands, one to each of them, and quickly explained to Theo, "This is Calvin. Mark's the one who—" Then I broke off, looking around for the other roommate. His and Calvin's bedroom door was open, and I could see it was empty. Travis was nowhere to be found, either.

"They're not here," Calvin told me. His tone was still sour, but he'd settled into the loveseat and picked up the controller again. "Travis' parents made him move back home, I haven't seen Adam in days, and Mark's out."

"Oh," I said. I couldn't help feeling some relief.

Quint spoke calmly from behind me. "We won't stay long. Let's get what we came for, you two."

I brought them to the door of my room and unlocked it, noticing as I did that Quint now had a grip on Theo's arm, just above the elbow, and the younger man was glowering at the floor. I winced. We needed to get out of here before anything else happened.

"Here's the mat," I said, grabbing it from the corner next to the bed as soon as the door was open. "And my zafu. C'mon, let's leave."

Quint blocked me from going out again. "Look around a minute," he said. "Check drawers; see if there's anything else you'd like. We don't want to make more trips than needed. Here, we'll hold those for you." He passed the mat to Theo before taking the handle attached to the zafu himself and adding, "Slow your breathing, Seb. You're safe."

I blinked, and then closed my eyes to concentrate on following his instruction. The air flowed from the tip of my nose down deep into my lungs, revitalizing my blood, followed by the briefest pause before it slipped out again, faintly warm on my philtrum. After a few cycles, I felt the panic ebbing away.

"Thank you," I said to Quint as I parted my eyelids.

"You're very welcome," he replied, with a smile. Theo's scowl had faded some, too, even though he was still in his husband's grasp.

They watched me slide open my desk drawers and look over my bookcase. There really wasn't much else that I hadn't grabbed the first time packing, though. The only thing I added was the sketchbook that held my original studies of Theo. If I was going to do a portrait of both of them, it might come in useful.

"This is all," I said, holding it up. "We can leave now."

"You're sure?" Quint asked, and I nodded. "Alright."

Calvin ignored us as we crossed the apartment again. We got all the way to the front door, Quint steering Theo ahead with a hand on his shoulder, before I remembered I needed to lock my room. "Oh, one second," I said, holding my keys up so they could see what I was doing as I backtracked around the corner into the common room. Quint took a few steps after me, just enough to stay in view.

As I fitted the key into the lock, Calvin muttered, "What, you had to bring your dad?"

I was confused, at first, until I saw him staring at Quint. "Oh," I said. "Um, no, he's a friend."

"They're talking about kicking us out, you know." His eyes were suddenly wet. "There's a disciplinary committee meeting on Monday."

Guilt hit deep in my gut. “I didn’t mean for that to happen,” I tried to explain. “I only wanted my insulin back before Mark overdosed on it.”

“Yeah,” he said. “But I almost wish I’d told them you *knew* that fucking cookie had weed in it, like he did.”

There was a flurry of movement out of the corner of my eye as Theo started to storm around Quint, and the Top pushed him back while taking a step closer to me himself. I glanced towards them, trying to show that I was okay. To Calvin, I asked, “Why didn’t you?”

“Because your boyfriend’s scary as shit,” he said. While I was still blinking, he added, “And I guess because you looked so... I don’t know, when Mark lied to them, you looked hurt.”

I had no idea how to respond to either part of that. My goofball Zain, scary? He knew exactly how to give me a stomach full of butterflies to serve all kinds of purposes, yet I’d never been truly *scared* of him. I couldn’t imagine it. Calvin had sided with me over his best friend mostly due to that and an expression on my face?

“Seb,” Quint’s soft voice called me out of my thoughts. “Let’s go, please.”

Double-checking the lock, I stuck my keys in my pocket. Calvin had gone back to playing the video game, his thumbs mashing over the controller furiously.

“I’m sorry,” I said. He didn’t answer.

The walk back to Quint and Theo’s building was just as quiet as breakfast had been. I wrestled with pangs of conscience the whole way, wondering if I could write to the committee on Calvin’s behalf. None of the stuff he’d done had been *that* bad. Not bad enough that he should be kicked out of school. Was it?

Then I remembered the night after eating the cookie, how scared I’d been, and how badly it could have gone if a doctor hadn’t been there to help. Should he just get away with that, even if it *was* an accident?

I needed to ask Zain what he thought, though I suspected he wouldn’t be quite as ready to forgive.

Quint walked silently next to me. Theo, on his other side, kept his gaze on the sidewalk most of the time, but I saw him giving his husband little, hesitant sideways glances, which Quint seemed not to notice. The Top wasn’t holding onto his arm anymore, and yet I got the impression if Theo

put one foot wrong, he would be firmly checked. I was very careful to not draw any attention to myself.

About a block from their apartment, a few droplets of rain began to fall, and Quint lengthened his stride. Theo and I both had to almost break into a jog to keep up with him. We pushed through the door to their lobby just as the skies opened in a downpour. "That was close," Theo said, looking over his shoulder at it, while Quint simply nodded hello to the front desk man and headed to the elevator. Behind his back, Theo grimaced at me before following.

The moment we were inside their apartment being greeted by an excited Jagger, Quint spoke. "Theodore William, please go to the corner. Seb, I'd like you to come with me."

I froze, looking up at him from where I'd crouched to remove my shoes. *Me?!*

His eyes softened. "You can finish taking those off first," he added, setting my zafu down on the kitchen counter.

Theo, meanwhile, had already dropped the yoga mat, hurriedly removed his sneakers and shoved them into the pantry, and was headed across the living room. The backs of both his ears were flame-red.

Uncertain despite Quint's words, I set my own shoes next to the other Brat's, and then stood up. "Um?"

"Your room," he said, putting his hand gently on my shoulder to turn me. The nerves made it almost impossible to take in the implications of him calling it that. "Jagger, come."

The dog trotted along behind us as Quint took me down the hall, into the room, and shut the door. Then he spun the desk chair around to face the bed and sat down on it with a sigh. I backed up to the edge of the mattress.

"I'm afraid I need to... have a discussion with Theo," he said, which was so far from what I expected that I just blinked dumbly at him. "I had planned, should this happen, to ask you to take Jagger out for a bit. However." He nodded to the rain-streaked window and then looked back at me. "I'm going to have to ask if you would mind staying in here until we're finished."

"Oh," I said, with what felt like a stronger blush than Theo's. "I can go out so you guys have privacy. Rain really doesn't bother me."

He gave me a Look that made me press my rear end harder against the bed. "That won't be necessary. You'll stay here and keep dry. Theo and I can postpone our discussion if needed."

“No, you don’t have to,” I said. I couldn’t help feeling it was partly *my* fault that Theo was in trouble. The last thing I wanted to do was make him wait more, when I remembered him telling me he hated it.

“Alright,” Quint said. “I’ll come get you when we’re done, understood?”

I nodded. After he left, shutting the door behind him and leaving Jagger with me, I lay on the bed. The rain against the window could almost drown out any other noises, if I concentrated.

It was quiet for awhile. I could just make out the murmurs of both their voices, but not what they were saying. Then there were footsteps that sounded like one of them crossing from the couch to the sideboard in the dining area and back. That was followed by about thirty seconds of complete silence.

I jumped as the first *crack* rang out, as plain as if I was in the same room with them. Quickly, I pulled my phone and earbuds from my bag, put them in, and started the white noise app I’d used to help block out my roommates’ parties.

It didn’t prevent all the sound from leaking through. Soon, I could even hear Theo crying. He seemed not to have the same verbal block I do when I’m in that position. My eyes watered at what were clearly pleas interspersed with his sobs. On the floor, Jagger laid down with his nose pressed to the crack beneath the door and whined softly.

Not too long after that, the spanking stopped, yet the weeping continued, gradually quieting over several minutes. I tried reading an assignment in one of my textbooks rather than listening to it. Yet much as I wanted to mind my own business, my attention kept wandering from color theory to sympathy for Theo. And for Quint, too. I remembered how he’d sighed before telling me he needed to do this. It couldn’t be easy to listen to the person you loved most in the world sounding like that and knowing you had caused it.

To think, when Zain spanked me, this was often the result he was *looking* for. Not a change in my behavior, necessarily, but simply a breaking down of my walls and a freeing of all the messy, complicated emotions behind them. Listening to the result from the outside gave me a whole new appreciation of his strength.

I must have missed them getting up, because the knock against the door made me jump again. Pulling my earbuds out, I rolled off the bed and went to answer it. Jagger got to his feet and moved back a few steps, his tail wagging.

I had expected to see only Quint in the hallway, but Theo was there, too. He stood behind his husband, barely visible from the waist up except for the arms wrapped around Quint’s middle

and a shock of auburn hair sticking out over the taller man's shoulder. Then Jagger pushed passed me to sniff at him, and he leaned down to rub behind the dog's ears, giving me a glimpse of his profile. His eyes were still watery and red, matching his cheekbones. When he saw me looking, he smiled wanly before hiding behind Quint again.

"We're finished, *mon chaton*. Would you like to come join us in the living room?"

"I'm okay here," I said. As Quint's eyebrow went up, I quickly added, "I mean, I'm, um, concerned about finishing my homework, so I'd like to do it now, if that's alright?" The director of residence life had spoken to my professors about the classes I missed on Wednesday, turning them into excused absences. I still needed to make up the work, though.

Theo emerged again, this time to give me the same look I'd gotten when I told him I enjoy salad. Quint only nodded and said, "You're welcome to do that out here, as well, if you'd like."

I shook my head. "I concentrate better alone." Plus, I wanted to give him and Theo more time without company. The bond between them shone strong and warm right now. They didn't need me casting a shadow on it.

"Alright," said Quint. "We'll eat lunch around noon."

"Thanks."

Jagger followed them as Quint pulled Theo around to his side and headed back to the living room. Shutting the door, I turned to my books once again.

I made better progress this time, completing two assignments before I needed to cross the hall to use the bathroom.

As I came out, Quint called, "Seb?" He was in the kitchen when I stuck my head around the corner, stirring something in a bowl with Theo still standing close beside him. "It's quarter to noon. Are you about wrapped up in there?"

I nodded, but stayed where I was, looking hesitantly at Theo. The other Brat smiled. It was stronger than his first attempt. Moving closer, I asked, "Can I help make something?"

"Yes," said Quint. "Do you know how to dice carrots?"

"What size?" I asked, coming to sit on one of the bar stools. "Brunoise, macédoine, parmentier, or carré?"

He stopped in the middle of taking a cutting board from a drawer to look at me, blinking a little. “Whichever one of those is a medium dice would be fine, I believe.”

“Parmentier?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

Next to him, Theo was biting his lip and snorting. His eyes were their normal color now, yet he never strayed far from Quint’s side as the older man moved around the kitchen getting a damp dishcloth to put under the cutting board, a chef’s knife, and finally the carrots from a colander in the sink.

I envied how easily Theo could show his need to be close. Often, Zain has to force me to accept affection after a spanking, when I’m feeling most vulnerable. Quint seemed to be used to it. He gently guided his husband out of the way a few times, and dropped an almost absentminded kiss on his cheek as he set the carrots down in front of me.

As I started cutting them, Theo asked, “So, I guess you really do like cooking? The mushroom risotto last night was *amazing*, though I thought that was just, y’know, as a thank you to us.”

“It was,” I said. “Cooking is relaxing sometimes, and knowing how to do it can make managing diabetes easier, but it isn’t really a hobby for me. It’s something I do because I’ve always done it, I guess.”

“Always?” he asked, watching me slice the carrots. “Did you always have freakishly good knife skills, too?”

“My mom taught me when I was young,” I said. “She’s a chef.”

From over by the refrigerator, Quint asked, “Does she work at a restaurant?”

I shook my head. “She used to work at L’Arpège, in Paris? It’s kind of famous. Now she caters a few weddings and parties a month, just to keep her hand in, she says.”

Theo wasn’t paying any attention to where Quint moved now. “Those are perfect cubes! When I buy them pre-cut, they don’t even look that good!”

“It’s not that difficult,” I said, blushing. “You just have to get the rhythm down and have a sharp knife.”

He came around the peninsula and started to sit on the other barstool, but as soon as he put his weight on it, he was wincing and standing again. “Ow! That damn paddle lasts all day.”

While I flushed harder and dropped my gaze to the cutting board, Quint said, "You can stop making poor-me eyes, angel. I *meant* for it to last."

Grumbling, the other Brat leaned against the counter next to me instead.

"I'm sorry," I said to him in an undertone, and he frowned.

"For what?"

I shrugged one shoulder. "I don't know, I just feel like it's my fault?" If I hadn't dragged them both into this mess, he'd be able to sit right now.

To my astonishment, he laughed. "You think a lot of things are your fault, don't you?" he asked. "Look, I lost my temper. It's...it's a pattern we've been working on for years." Quint and he exchanged a glance that held a lot of meaning before he went on, "That wasn't your fault, it was mine, and now we've dealt with it, so it's done. Nothing more to feel guilty about, y'know?" He spread his arms out across the counter, palms up.

I thought of the calm I feel after a spanking, the way my tears wash away so many bad emotions, and nodded.

Clasping his hands together again, he leaned closer and added, conspiratorily, "But that doesn't mean I can't whine a little about being sore. It's in the Brats' Bill of Rights."

A giggle escaped me. "The Brats' Bill of Rights?"

"Yeah, don't you have a copy?" he asked. "I'll have to get you one. It's the third amendment. 'The Brat shall reserve the right to complain, without repercussion, about soreness in the buttocks for a period of twenty-four hours after a hand-spanking, forty-eight hours after a paddling, and seventy-two hours after a belting.' Which means I've got the whole weekend still, and I intend to *milk* it."

Quint, listening to this as he opened a can of chickpeas, sighed and shook his head.

"What if those don't apply?" I asked, trying not to grin. "What about other implements?"

He looked puzzled again. "You don't get paddled?"

"Theodore," Quint said, with considerably less humor twinkling in his eyes than there had been a moment ago.

"It's okay," I told him. After what I'd heard today, it was only fair to let Theo know something about my own discipline, and I didn't want him in trouble again. "We don't own a... paddle," I explained, my face hot. "Zain kind of just uses whatever."

"Whatever'?" the other Brat repeated, dubiously.

I nodded. Concentrating hard on dicing carrots so I didn't have to pay too close attention to the words coming out of my mouth, I said, "Most often it's his hand or my hairbrush. Sometimes wooden spoons, rubber spatulas, paint stirrers, switches — those are only for a certain, um, issue — a doubled-over extension cord, or a bath brush. That one's the worst. Well, my flip-flop might've been worse, but he only used that once, over my pants, and then I got rid of them, so it's hard to judge."

There was silence as I finished. Cautiously, I looked up, and saw Theo staring at me with his mouth hanging open. "You've been spanked with *all* of those? With a *flip-flop*?"

"Um, yeah," I said. "He actually took one *off my foot* in the middle of a spanking to use it." I was still indignant over that, when I thought about it.

"*Why?!*"

"Probably because he didn't want to get up and find something else," I said. "We were outside, so it was the closest thing at hand."

His look of bafflement only increased. "Quint, are you hearing this?"

"Yes, angel," Quint said, reaching over to pick up the cutting board full of carrots and bring it to the pot he'd put on the stove. "Would you two set the table, please? This soup won't take long to cook."

"Quint!" Theo said, and another meaningful glance passed between them. I didn't understand it.

Nor did I understand when Quint told him, "I've swatted you with a wooden spoon on a few occasions I can remember, and if you ever misbehaved near a forest, you might learn what a switch feels like. None of those items are unheard of, so stop making Seb out to be strange."

I opened my mouth to say he wasn't, really, but Theo beat me to it.

"I didn't mean *Seb*, I meant his *Top!*"

Laughter bubbled out of me again. They both looked over, and I said, "No, you're right, Zain *is* strange."

Quint smiled. "That reminds me, he needs to know about this morning, *mon chaton*," he said. "Why we went to your dorm, and what happened there. Can you tell him, or would you like help?"

"I can do it," I said. I'd been planning to tell him the part about Calvin, anyway, and from there, he'd start asking questions and guessing the rest of it, if I didn't volunteer the information.

"Good," he said. "Angel, come and set the table, now, please."

With a heavy sigh, Theo went to get bowls out of the cupboard.

I worked on my assignments again after we ate, until I got a text that read, *Skype me! I have news!*

When it connected, I said, "Hi, Z... I kinda have news, too."

He tilted his head a little. "Okay, you go first."

"Um, so, this morning, Quint found out I left my yoga mat and zafu at the dorm?"

Grinning and tipping his chin even more, he said, "Where they were *incredibly* helpful, I'm sure."

I made a face at him. "We went to get them—"

"Whoa, wait, back up," he interrupted. "I wanna know how Quint found out, and what he said."

"Why does it matter?" I asked.

"So I can know if he's Topping you properly and give him some pointers if not, *obvi*," he replied, rolling his eyes.

Sighing, I told him. It took several tries to give the amount of detail he wanted, and I was blushing hard by the time I'd finished. Zain, meanwhile, was musing.

"Y'know, we should really think about giving him swatting privileges," he said. "Poor guy's palm *had* to be itching all through that. Look, mine is now!" Holding his right hand to the camera, like I could see it itch, he wiggled his fingers. "I know the rule has always been nothing gets used on you that I haven't felt, though, which is gonna be tricky if I can't meet him in person again sometime soon..." He trailed off in thought, while I blinked, wondering if he was actually implying what it sounded like. Finally, he gave me a cheerful grin. "Well, I'll work something out. What happened when you went to get the stuff?"

Shaking all kinds of strange images out of my head, I told him about seeing my roommate, and what I'd learned. I left out the part with Theo getting in trouble, though.

"Do you think Calvin deserves that?" I asked. "He didn't lie about the cookie, to us or to them, and he didn't steal anything like Mark did, either. I was thinking I could maybe write to the committee or the dean, telling them not to kick him out."

An uncharacteristic sharpness had come over Zain's face. "I think Calvin made his bed with underage drinking and drug use, babe," he said. "Not to mention leaving those cookies out, which was a really, really dumb thing to do even if you *don't* live with a diabetic."

That was true, and yet...

"*Habibi*, it's up to you," he went on, his voice and eyes both soft, now. "If you think they should take those things into consideration, and it would help you feel less guilty about it to write a letter, write it. At least then, you'll feel you did what you could."

I nodded. "Okay, I will." I felt better having made the decision, and knowing he supported me even though he didn't agree.

"If they kick him out regardless, and I see you blaming yourself for it, I am so giving Quint permission to swat you, implement rule aside," he added. "Got it?"

Squirming in the chair, I said, "Yeah, got it," and then, mostly to change the subject, "What was *your* news?"

With a grin that said he knew exactly what I was doing, he replied, "It's about Platt, of course. Did you happen to mention bondage in your email to him?"

I huffed. "I told you, they're private."

"No, I know," he said. "I'm only asking because he had a... a little self-bondage mishap today."

"WHAT?" I asked "Is he okay?!"

"He's fine," Zain said, quickly. "It was only his wrists. He's got a bit of rope burn, nothing else."

I listened to him explain what had happened, and their brief conversation about it after he'd freed Platt. Empathy for the boy filled me as he spoke. Suddenly, I realized how lucky I had been, to have Zain to explore my desires with and keep me safe.

“We finished The Lion King and he left right before I texted you,” he concluded. “I was just wondering what you might’ve said to him.”

“I didn’t tell him he should tie his hands together!” I said. “I was trying to explain about safewords.”

Laughing, he said, “Well, on your next one, maybe slip in something about paramedic shears?”

“No! He’ll know you told me. Anyway, he hasn’t answered my last one yet, and I don’t think he’ll want to, after this.”

“You might be surprised, babe. I’ll bet you ten bucks he’ll reply tonight.”

I shook my head, which turned out to be a smart move, because right after I did my Lantus that night, my phone buzzed.

Does Mohyeldin always sing along with every single song during a Disney movie?

That was all he wrote, but I was smiling stupidly as I typed back, *Yes. Sorry, I should have warned you.*

Chapter Twenty

After what had happened, I thought Platt would start avoiding me again. I certainly didn't expect him to come back from chapel service with JJ on Sunday, his arms crossed over his chest and sleeves pulled firmly down to hide the gauze wrapped around his wrists. Covering my surprise, I gave him a winning smile from my rack. "Hey! Wanna stick around and share some of JJ's endless supply of Halloween candy?"

"Uh-uh," JJ said, as Platt pointedly avoided watching him change into PT gear. "Y'all both bailed on playing Call of Duty with me yesterday and *then* you want my candy?"

"Oh, c'mon," I said. "I told you I asked Platt to help me with the homework I couldn't get done."

The kid looked taken aback at the lie, but luckily JJ was pulling a t-shirt over his head and didn't notice. I aimed my best pouty face at my roommate, who caught sight of it as he tugged the collar of the shirt down around his neck, and said, "For the love of— you're a *Marine*, man, have some *dignity*."

"*Pleeeaaassssee?*" Rolling onto my back, I hung my head over the edge of the mattress and clasped my hands beneath my chin. "*Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeaaaaaassssee?*"

"Fine, fine, just stop that caterwauling," he said, snatching a bag of candy from his desk and holding it up.

I laughed as I grabbed some. "You call *yourself* a Marine when you surrender so easily?"

He ignored my taunt and offered the bag to Platt. After glancing at me, the kid carefully reached in and took a handful. Beaming, I flipped onto my stomach again and nodded to my desk chair.

"You can use that, if you want. I'm gonna stay up here."

There was almost no hesitation before he sat down. I felt like doing a silent cheer.

"What about you, Platt?" JJ asked him as he took his own chair. "Thinking of joining the few and the proud when you get outta here?"

With a quick little shake of his head, Platt started arranging his candy in a neat row on the edge of my desk.

"Why not?" I asked, frowning. "The Corps is awesome."

He bit his lip a moment, his cheekbones pinkening, before he answered with his gaze still on the colorful line of wrappers. "I want to become a SEAL, like my dad was."

"Bad. Ass," JJ said, nodding and holding out his fist. Platt's eyebrows pinched together as he tapped his own knuckles against it. He looked up at me uncertainly, and I smiled.

"You'll be an great SEAL," I told him. "Have you let your squad leader or advisor know that's your goal?"

He shook his head again.

"You should," I said. "They'll get you on the path to mini-BUD/S and all that."

"Platypus!" JJ exclaimed. We both watched him lean back in his desk chair with equal looks of bewilderment. "Been trying to think of a nickname for you," he said to Platt. "That's it. They're semiaquatic, they chew rocks, and the males have venom. Total badasses."

I cracked up. "Are you some kind of expert in platypuses? Is that even the right plural form?"

"You can say platypuses, platypodes, or platypi," he replied, "and I wrote a report on them in sixth grade, okay? We were studying Australia. Don't you think it's the perfect nickname?"

Nodding, I said, "I like it! Platt, what do you think?"

The confusion hadn't left his face, but he said, "Okay."

I unwrapped a miniature Twix bar and bit into it happily while JJ started regaling us with more platypus facts.

Despite what I told Cameron about how I don't hold grudges easily, I was not ready to forgive any of Seb's roommates. The memory of him sobbing and apologizing for being high was much too painfully clear, and as far as I was concerned, Calvin deserved to be expelled right alongside Mark.

My gentle, sensitive boy thought otherwise. So I encouraged him to write the letter, knowing it would set his mind at ease, and hoping that it wouldn't lead to more interactions between them. I was glad when Quint emailed me on Monday to say he'd gone along with Seb to drop it off in person early that morning.

We didn't see either Calvin or the infamous Mark, he wrote. Seb seemed relieved to have done it, yet I am slightly concerned about him. He spent Saturday evening sketching and most of

yesterday in a studio. When I asked what he was working on, he would only say “a painting” before changing the subject. I didn’t push it, because Theo can be similarly secretive at the start of a new artistic endeavor. You also said you would consider the painting and drawing to be “excessive” if he forgot or refused to eat, and he came home for lunch and dinner without prompting. However, I did want to bring it to your attention.

I grinned, picturing Seb, who is entirely without guile, trying to be sneaky about the portrait I knew he was painting to thank his hosts. Not wanting to give the surprise away or get Quint more worried, I wrote back, *Thanks. I’ll talk to him about it when we Skype tonight.*

What I actually said on the call was, “Y’know, you could’ve just told him it was homework,” and he glared at me.

“Zain, that would be *lying*.”

“Oh, c’mon,” I said, rolling my eyes. “A little white lie never hurt anyone.”

He rubbed his temple with two fingers. “You are so bad at this. Really. Now that I have Quint to compare you to, I can truly say you’re an awful Top.”

Sighing, I shook my head. “See, I knew there’d be a downside to this arrangement somewhere. You’ve gone and gotten standards and expectations now. No more coasting through for me.”

He opened his mouth, no doubt to lecture me on Proper Toppiness, but before he could say anything, his phone buzzed. “It’s an email from the Office of Residence Life,” he said, looking at it like it might bite him. “They told me they’d let me know the committee’s decision.”

“Well, read it, babe!”

I watched him open it, his eyes flicking across the screen as he read, and then he said, “Mark was expelled. Calvin and Travis are both suspended from the Residence Hall for the rest of the semester, and they have to do drug and alcohol counseling. They all have four days to appeal. If they don’t, they’ll be moved out of the dorm at the end of the week.”

“Will other students be moved into the apartment?” I asked. The last thing we needed was more problems with new roommates.

Seb answered, “No, it says their spots will probably stay open, so they can move back in the spring. I can request a new room at that time, if I want. I guess it’s easier, logistically, for them to switch people around at the start of a semester.”

I nodded. “Okay, so assuming they don’t appeal, or they do and the decision is upheld, what do we want to do about your living situation?”

Frowning, he said, "What do you mean? In either of those cases, I'll go back to my dorm. And if for some reason they *aren't* suspended, I'll request another room now."

It was clear the idea of staying with Quint and Theo for longer hadn't even occurred to him. No surprise. I hesitated to suggest it as an option, knowing how he'd react.

Was it really necessary, anyway? The part of me that said 'yes' was all protective Top, wanting him under the watchful eye of someone I trusted as much as possible. If I took a step back, though, I knew those instincts were mostly being stirred up by my lingering guilt that I couldn't be there for him when he was high. Seb is capable of taking care of himself.

Not to mention, while Quint *had* said he was welcome to stay as long as needed, I doubted the man wanted to have an extra person living with them for four years. Seb would likely point out the same thing, and his knowledge of my confidence in him would be shaken, too.

It's not like he'll never see Quint again, I reminded myself. They'd still have the dinners we set up before all of this started, and perhaps I could suggest increasing those to twice-weekly, or even having him stay just the weekends with them. And I was already planning to give the other Top more tools for discipline.

"Right," I said, finally. "But you're not going back there until all three of them are gone, okay?"

"Of course," he replied, with the slightest hint of a lingering frown.

To distract him, and because I'd been planning to bring it up anyway, I grinned and asked, "So how's the edging been going, my boy?"

Immediately, he blushed and looked over towards the door, which I knew was closed. "Zain! It's hard enough trying to keep that a secret without you talking about it!"

"Ah, but have *you* been hard enough, that's the question."

He squirmed in his chair — quite similar to the squirm he does when he's concerned about his butt — and my smirk grew more wicked. In the state he was in, his body had probably reacted instantly.

"Stand up and let me see," I commanded softly. When he obeyed, flushing hotter as he did, I could make out his erection through the thin yoga pants he was wearing. His hands moved to cover it. "No touching," I reminded him. "Unless you haven't done your edges yet today; then you could do one now, while I watch."

"I have, sir," he said, with a longing tone that suggested he was tempted to lie.

“Pity,” I said. “You can sit down.”

He reclaimed his seat and put both hands on top of the desk, curled into fists.

“Wanna hear what I have planned for you this weekend, my boy?” I asked. “Or do you want it to be a surprise?”

“A surprise, sir.”

I smiled once more, knowing he didn’t want me detailing it when he had no chance of relief. “Okay. Tomorrow, though, while you edge, I want you thinking about what you hope it is, and then write me an email describing it. If you’re lucky, I might take some of your suggestions. Can you do that for me?”

Shifting again, he said, “Yes, sir.”

“Good boy,” I praised. “I’ll be looking forward to reading it all day.”

We ended the call shortly after that, because JJ returned and my study period started. I was probably as distracted as Seb all through it, and had to take a long shower before taps so I’d be able to sleep that night.

The email arrived as we formed up for the evening meal the next day. I just had time to glance at it and see the subject line: *As requested, sir.*

Why you little... I thought, shoving the phone back into my pocket. He *knew* I wouldn’t be able to read it for half an hour, at least, and it was going to torment me. *Getting cheeky, my boy? I see how it is.*

Dinner took forever. When my squad leader finally dismissed me from the table, I made record time back to my room. I opened the door, crossed to my desk, woke the computer up, and then paused and squinted over my shoulder. Something had registered in my peripheral vision.

A large manila envelope was lying on the desk, now decorated with my shoe print. Backtracking a few steps, I scooped it up and turned it over. “MOHYELDIN” was typed across the center of the front. Frowning, I slid my thumb behind the flap to tear it open.

It held a single, thick sheet of paper. As I pulled it out, I noticed it was glossy on one side, like a photo.

No, it was a photo, I realized. Surrounded by an uneven white border, but plenty big enough to make out all the details, including the watermark of a porn website on the lower left. A man was on his back with his legs and arms tied over his head to a bed frame, while a larger man in a leather harness crouched over him, clearly about to penetrate him with a huge, painful-looking sex toy.

My Academy portrait was photoshopped onto the head of the dominant partner. Pasted over the submissive's face, was Platt's. They'd even taken care to find a shoot with models that matched his pale skin tone and my darker one, though the manipulation was still obvious.

I shoved it back into the envelope and stood there, breathing through a white-hot flash of rage. For a moment, I couldn't think clearly. Then it registered: If they had left one for *me*, chances were....

Turning, I ran towards Platt's room for the second time that week.

Nakamura opened the door dripping wet, with a towel wrapped around his waist, and gaped at me. "Dad? What the hell-?"

"Is Platt here?" I demanded.

"He went right from dinner to his judo meet," he said, flinging droplets of water off his hair with his headshake.

I held up the envelope, clutched in my hand. "Did you see one of these when you came back?"

"Uh, yeah, I put it on his desk."

"Let me—" I said, already starting to step around him. He jumped out of the way and watched me stride across the room to Platt's desk. The second envelope was identical to mine, except for the name typed on it. It hadn't been opened yet. Picking it up, I turned back to Nak. "Is the meet in that same gym where he was practicing before?"

"I think so," he said. "What's in those, anyway?"

My jaw clenched a moment before I made myself relax and give him a closed-lip smile. "Someone's sick idea of a joke. Don't mention this to anyone. Not even Platt, okay?"

He looked more puzzled, but nodded readily. "Sure thing, Dad."

"Thank you." On my way out the door, I remembered to add, "Bye."

I walked in double-time out of Bancroft and across the Yard, towards Alumni Hall. Logically, I knew if Platt was at a judo meet, surrounded by his teammates, he'd be safe, yet I needed to check. The picture *wasn't* a joke. It was a threat against both of us, designed to scare and shame.

I felt only anger for myself — that I had been used in such a way, my dominance turned into a weapon against my friend — but for Platt, I was afraid. Why deliver the envelopes physically to our rooms, rather than sending emails like they had with Cameron? Why risk being seen? The answer was obvious. They wanted us to know that Belcher might not be allowed on the Yard anymore, but Gould was still there, still close. In every upperclassman I passed, I looked for him.

My thoughts raced. Did they know about the rope mishap? I couldn't see how they would. Probably, as I had always suspected, Belcher simply sensed Platt's submissive nature during the hazing. And he'd cast me in the opposing role right from the beginning. I could still hear his taunts in my mind: *"Platt, quit gaping at Mohyeldin. We all know you want him; you don't have to advertise it."*

The gym was crowded with people, both on the floor and in the small set of bleachers that had been pulled out from the wall. Platt's hair caught my eye immediately. He was stepping into the center of the ring outlined on the mat to greet his opponent.

As they bowed to each other, I scanned the rest of the room for Gould, but instead spotted more platinum blonde in the bleachers: Cameron, sitting next to Myrick. They both leaned forward to watch the match while I circled around a knot of midshipmen and climbed up to them. Their focus was so completely on Platt that when I took a seat on the bench next to Cameron and said, "Good evening, ma'am," she jumped.

"Mohyeldin! What the hell are you doing here?"

I was tempted to make a flippant comment about Brigade spirit, since I assumed that was why *they* were there. Instead, I passed her the envelopes. "Don't open them now, ma'am," I said, glancing around. "They're... photos, similar to the ones you received, but starring Platt and I."

Her lips tightened, and she glared down at them like she was trying to set them on fire with her mind. On her other side, her boyfriend sharply asked, "When did you find them?"

"Just now," I said. "One in my room, one in Platt's. I came to check on him."

Myrick's gaze flicked back the ring. "He didn't see them?" he asked, not looking away from the kid, who was still circling his opponent.

"No, sir," I said. "His is sealed. There could be fingerprints—"

Cameron shook her head. "I doubt it," she bit out. "They're too smart for that. This is happening in *my* company, and I can't stop it."

"Justine..." Myrick said, in an odd tone that was partly comforting and partly warning.

She looked like she might've responded, except down on the floor, Platt made his move. I barely caught the throw. There was just a loud *thwack*, and the other guy stared up at him from the mat, looking surprised, as the crowd cheered Platt's victory.

"That's it!" Myrick shouted down, while I whooped. Cameron, too, lost some of her anger in a smile.

Then the referee grabbed Platt's hand and held it high in the air, and as he did, the loose sleeve of the martial arts uniform fell down around the kid's elbow. He'd taken the gauze off, I saw. The line of rope burn was plainly visible.

"What is that on his wrist?" Cameron asked, alarmed. Myrick lept to his feet and started down the bleachers, and she followed him. Grimacing, I did, too.

The Judo Club had surrounded their teammate to offer their congratulations. He accepted them with the tiniest hint of a grin before bending to grab a water bottle from a cooler. Myrick and Cameron stopped right on the other side of it, and blinking at both of them, Platt said, "You came." It wasn't quite a statement or a question. His face was expressionless, until he saw me and frowned faintly.

Then Myrick said, "Show me your wrist," and the kid's look of utter betrayal cut me to the core.

"No!" I told him. "I didn't, I *swear* to you. You have my word."

Cameron reached out to take his arm, saying, "Platt, let—"

He jerked away from her. I watched his shoulders rise and fall with his ragged breathing as tears sprang into his eyes. *No*.

Spinning on his heel, he ploughed through the crowd and out into the passageway. I was the first to dash after him, with the upperclassmen behind me. Having to clear the path slowed him just enough that I caught up with a few long strides down the empty hall.

"Platt," I said, walking beside him rather than blocking his way and shooting a glance over my shoulder to make Cameron and Myrick keep their distance. "I did *not* tell them. Listen to me. They saw your wrist just now when your sleeve fell down."

His feet faltered. "They saw?"

"Yeah," I said, in a lower voice, "but it's fine. Stop a second and *trust me*."

He slowed to a halt. Carefully, Myrick stepped up to his other side, followed by Cameron, so the four of us formed a semicircle.

"Please show us?" Cameron asked.

With a gulp, he pushed his sleeves up and held out his wrists. "They're just from training, ma'am," he said. I had to admire how he kept his hands steady.

"No, those are rope burns," Myrick said, in the voice of steel. "Who did this?"

The kid's eyes widened in panic and darted to me.

Seeing that, Myrick asked, "What do you know about it, Mohyeldin?"

"Platt, it's okay, you can tell them," I said. Before he had a chance to look gutted again, I went on, "Tell them about that event for the National Eagle Scout Association, how you were brushing up on your rope skills, and you had a small accident. I know it's embarrassing for an Scout to admit to, but it's fine. Everyone makes mistakes."

All three of them stared in wonder at that load of BS, and I couldn't really blame them. I did hope, though, that Myrick and Cameron would take a hint and have some faith in me for once.

Hesitantly, Platt said, "I was... It was an accident, sir. A stupid accident."

The upperclassmen exchanged a long look.

At last, Cameron asked, "You did that to yourself?"

Platt nodded, flushing.

Myrick scrutinized me, and I met his gaze head-on. Whatever he saw seemed to satisfy him. "The match hasn't ended," he said to Platt. "Go support your teammates." As the kid left with a last glance backward, Myrick gestured to the envelopes still in Cameron's hand. "Justine, take those to the Conduct Office and have them reopen the investigation."

She obeyed without question, walking off in the opposite direction. I watched her until she was around the corner, and then turned back to him.

“So, um... you just recognize rope burns, sir? Is there a story behind that? Because they’re not, y’know, the most obvious injury to diagnose if you’ve never seen one, are they? Sir?”

Of course, there were many explanations for how a guy of his background *could* have dealt with them before, yet he offered nothing but an impassive expression.

Grinning, I added, “Might want to be more careful, sir. It almost looked like you gave an order to a first-year Company Commander just now.”

“Mohyeldin.”

“Yes, sir?” I asked, all innocence.

“Go study.”

“Aye aye, sir,” I said, and added a snappy salute for good measure.

Skyping Seb took first priority, though, before JJ got back. He answered with a mischievous, “Hello, sir,” and I smiled and shook my head regretfully.

“I’m sorry, babe, I didn’t get a chance to read your email yet. There was a minor incident.”

Briefly, I filled him in. He listened without interrupting, frowning harder and harder as I spoke.

“So Platt doesn’t know about the photos?” he asked when I was done.

I blinked. That was not what I had expected him to focus on. “I don’t see any reason for him to. It would only scare him, and probably make him withdraw.” Cameron and Myrick both seemed to have come to the same conclusion. From the look on Seb’s face, I surmised, “You disagree.”

Sighing, he said, “Not exactly. I get your point, but... he’s going to find out eventually, and then he might feel betrayed by you again. Or think that you kept it from him because he’s a sub, which *is* partly true.”

“It is not!” I said. “It’s because he isn’t confident about his submission yet, and thinking somebody else had noticed it would flip him out.”

“Yeah, and knowing that has put you and the other two into Protective Dom overdrive. You don’t have to *show* him the pictures or describe them to him, you could just give him a general idea so he’s not completely in the dark and stays on guard.”

Absently, I said, "I'm pretty sure Cameron's a switch, not a dom," while I thought over his words. Platt was almost always 'on guard', but I saw what he meant. "Let me figure out how to tell him."

"Okay," Seb said. "You're being careful too, right?"

"Yes, *habibi*. I promise."

He exhaled and leaned back in the chair. I watched his teeth catch his lower lip and let go a couple of times before he blurted, "I miss you. I can't wait to see you this weekend."

I positively *beamed*. He hadn't even hidden the admission in French! "Me too, babe. I have so many plans. Oh, speaking of, have you bought your bus tickets yet?"

"No, I was going to tonight."

"Don't," I said. "I need to talk to Quint first, see if he could possibly drive you down or pick you up. And before you say that's too big a favor, you can give the bus money to him for his fuel and time."

Rather than argue, he shifted and fussed with his alert bracelet. "Is this about, um, what you said before about... needing to see him in person so he— so you...?"

"Yeah," I said, laughing a little. "I noticed you didn't object to the concept yesterday. It's just laying the groundwork, though, babe. I did mean it when I said the hands-on stuff would only be with your consent."

"And Theo's," he mumbled into his lap.

"Yep, his, too," I confirmed. "I figured Quint could discuss it with him, though, unless you *want* all four of us to talk it over together—?"

"No!"

I hadn't thought he would. It's hard to resist making him blush when he wears it so adorably. "Okay," I said. "I've gotta go, but I'm gonna email him as soon as I hang up, and I'll text you about the tickets once we've got the details figured. He might not be able to this weekend, anyway."

Seb nodded, uncertainty all over his face. Clearly, he didn't know which result he hoped for.

"*Je t'aime*."

"Love you, too," I replied, as JJ came in behind me. "Bye."

*

I took longer to write the email, explaining my request and the reasoning behind it, than Quint took to answer.

Dear Zain,

Theo and I have plans with friends this Saturday, but picking Seb up on Monday night would be no trouble at all. I can work Tuesday morning from home, which would allow me to recover any lost sleep. I absolutely refuse to let either of you pay me. The trust you've shown is an honor, and I admire how closely you abide by your principles.

Looking forward to seeing you again,

Quint

I texted Seb, wishing I could watch his reaction. I suspected relief would outweigh the trepidation this time. Then, finally, I opened his email from before dinner and started to read.

Chapter Twenty-One

With a liner brush loaded full of titanium white, I leaned into the canvas and added delicate hints of a sparkle to Theo's eyes. Then I stepped back from the easel to take in the whole thing. *Yes, much better.* It might be finished. I wouldn't know until I let it sit awhile, though, and it needed to dry, anyway. Carefully, I took it off the easel and transferred it to one of the racks in the corner of the studio.

No matter how good the painting, it wouldn't be an adequate show of my appreciation. I had never meant to stay for longer than a few days with Quint and Theo, and it was over a week now since they first welcomed me into their home.

I pitched in with cleaning and cooking as much as they would let me. Theo had huffed when I offered to take the trash out last night, saying, "Would you quit being so *good*? You're making me look bad," and I started to apologize before realizing he was teasing.

I'd learned not to suggest I was overstaying my welcome, though, not if I didn't want Quint calling me 'Sébastien' and looking like he was tempted to swat me. Zain wouldn't have stopped with one swat. Knowing that made me feel guilty, like I was taking advantage of the fact Quint couldn't use physical discipline yet. It seemed wrong. But I tried not to think about how that would be fixed after this weekend.

As I was cleaning and drying my brushes and palette, working quickly so I wouldn't be late for dinner, my phone chimed twice with incoming emails. I wiped my hands off on my jeans before looking at it. One was from Platt, and the second, just a minute later, from Zain. My pulse sped up. Had something else happened? Needing to make sure Zain was okay, I opened his message first.

Hey Babe,

Nak's dragging me to a Spectrum (the gay-straight alliance, remember?) meeting tonight, so I won't be able to Skype, but wanted to fill you in on what happened today.

Cameron called me and Myrick into her office to tell us there weren't any useful fingerprints on the photos left for me or Platt. All they found out is they were probably printed from a cheap inkjet printer.

I told them I thought we should let Platt know — not all the gory details, just a general idea, like you said. Myrick disagreed, but Cameron overruled and told him to go get the kid. She actually took the lead in telling him, too. I guess she'd already talked to him about some stuff, because she said, "Remember those pictures that Belcher and Gould sent to me last year? They made

one with you and Mohyeldin and left a copy in each of your rooms. Mohyeldin found them and brought them to me."

Platt was really quiet for a few seconds. It's so hard to read him sometimes. Then he asked if we had all seen the picture. We told him yes. He said, "I want to see it," and while Myrick and I were explaining at the same time that he didn't need to, and it wasn't a good idea, Cameron just calmly showed him a photo she'd taken of it on her phone.

I kinda expected him to get angry or run out again like he did from the judo meet. Myrick must've, too, because he moved to block the door. But the kid just looked at the phone's screen until it dimmed, while we all watched him, and then said, more to himself than to us, "They're not going to make me leave."

He was so determined, I wanted to give him the biggest bear-hug ever. Had to sit on my hands to stop myself. xD

Cameron looked pleased, too. She told us she'd keep us informed on the investigation and dismissed us both. Out in the passageway, he didn't say anything, so I asked, "Alright, Platypus?" (JJ is responsible for that nickname, not me, I swear), and he said, "Yes," still like he was kinda deep in thought. So. I'm not sure what's happening in his head, but he seems okay? I'll keep an eye on him, of course.

*Love,
Z*

My heart slowed and went out to Platt as I read. I had no desire to see the picture, yet I could imagine how difficult it must've been for him. Hoping he had really taken it as well as Zain thought, I opened the other email. It was much shorter.

Didn't it bother you to tell me all that stuff about you and Mohyeldin? How do you deal with knowing other people know?

Merde, I thought.

That sounded like maybe he was flipping out a little over people seeing him as submissive. Sitting down on a nearby stool, I tried to figure out how to respond.

Hi Platt,

Yes, it was difficult to tell you. It's private information, and normally it's no one's business except Zain and I. Not because I'm ashamed of it, though. This is hard to understand if you've never experienced how much strength there is in submitting to the person you love. I feel weak in a lot

of other ways, never there. I'm not lesser than him. We're complimentary forces. It takes both to make a balance, like yin and yang. Does that make sense?

Seb Crews

I sent it and sat there a moment, debating whether telling Zain was worth potentially damaging Platt's trust. Just as I decided to wait for his response first, Quint called me. I swore under my breath. "Hi, I'm sorry I'm late, I'm leaving the studio now," I answered, grabbing my bag and rushing out the door so it wasn't a lie.

After a pause, Quint said, "You aren't late, *mon chaton*. I was calling to remind you that you should probably be cleaning up soon. How are you feeling?"

It was a loaded question. Two days ago, Zain filled the other Top in on almost everything that had happened with Platt since the start of Plebe Summer, leaving out only the dom/sub stuff, and since then, Quint had been asking it a lot more. I was getting better at not saying 'fine' automatically, but giving an acceptable response was still difficult. He waited patiently while I searched for words and walked downstairs.

"Um, distracted, I guess," I said, at last.

"Due to anything in particular?"

"Seeing Zain tomorrow, and everything going on there," I said. "He just emailed me that they couldn't find fingerprints on the pictures. And finding out if my roommates appealed."

I heard him make a small sound in the back of his throat. "Would you say perhaps 'stressed' would be a better word for how you're feeling?"

I had just stepped out of the building onto the street, and I nearly bumped into someone. "I— maybe? But I'm excited to see Zain, too. That's why I said 'distracted,'" I explained, trying not to sound defensive.

"Yes, of course," he said, drily. "I'll expect you in a few minutes, alright?"

"*Oui, monsieur*," I replied as I quickened my pace.

He didn't bring it up again, though after dinner, he set up a game of Scrabble on the dining table and politely told me I would be playing, not drawing. I thought about two unfinished pieces waiting in my sketchbook. Then I meekly sat down and started arranging letter tiles on my holder.

"What the hell does 'pomme' mean?" Theo asked after my first turn.

"It's 'apple' in French," I said, and he started laughing.

"No fair! English only! Or if you can use that, I should be allowed to use *my* French."

I frowned. "I thought you didn't know French."

Rolling his eyes, he said, "No, like 'pardon my French' French."

"Neither of you may use any form of French," Quint said, smiling. "I'm sorry, Seb."

I removed an 'm' to make 'pome' and said, "That's English. It's a term used in botany for any fleshy fruit with a core. Like an apple."

Quint blinked at me, but Theo cracked up and didn't argue.

We played until eleven. It was only when I was crawling into bed that I realized Platt never wrote back.

He still hadn't the next morning, either. My phone dinged during my meditation, and I stopped, thinking it might be him. It was the Office of Residence Life, though. I sat a moment looking at it with the oddest mix of relief and sadness. Then I got up and went down the hall to knock on the door of the master bedroom.

"C'min," Theo called, sounding sleepy. He was visible as nothing more than a lump under the comforter and a ruffled mess of auburn hair on a pillow when I turned the knob and pushed it open.

"Sorry," I said, stepping into the room. "Where's Quint?"

One section of the lump detached itself from the rest to emerge as a hand pointing vaguely towards the wall to my left. "B'frm."

At the same time, a door in the wall opened, and Quint appeared. He had a toothbrush dangling from his mouth, which he took out to say, "Good morning." Holding up an index finger, he stepped to the sink and spat out foam, then wiped his lips and turned back to me. "You'll have to forgive Theo. He doesn't do Saturdays prior to nine AM. How are you feeling?"

"None of my roommates filed an appeal before the deadline, so they'll be moved out over the weekend," I said. "If you have time, we could bring my stuff there this morning, before I leave."

Shaking his head, he replied, “We’ll be returning too late on Monday to worry about getting you settled back into the dorm that night. I want you to keep your things here and stay until Tuesday, after your classes.” I opened my mouth to protest about being in the way, and he cut me off with a pointed, “I would also like to know how you’re feeling, please.”

My face went pink as I ducked my head. “...A lot of things.”

“Start with one and go from there,” he suggested gently.

“I’m glad that Mark will be gone,” I said, because that was easiest. “I thought he would be the most likely to appeal, so that’s relief, and a surprise, a little. The other two are getting counseling. I hope it helps them.”

He made the little noise in his throat again when I didn’t continue. “Anything else?”

“I’m... I’m going to— you’ve done so much, and I just. Um.” Stopping, I tried not to look pathetic.

Quint stepped forward and enveloped me in a hug. “I’m going to miss you, as well, *mon chaton*,” he said. Pulling back, he brushed my bangs to one side of my forehead and cupped his other hand under my chin to keep me from looking down. “Remember, though, we’ll be here, just a few blocks away.”

“I’ll miss you, too, Seb,” Theo said. He was propped up on one elbow now. “I’m so mad I booked a gig on Monday and can’t go down with Quint to pick you up. Feels like I won’t see you again until you’re leaving. C’mere, I want a goodbye hug.”

I crossed the room and leaned down for him to yank me into a one-armed embrace. My eyes were prickling when he let go, which was ridiculous.

“You could come with me to drop him off at the bus station, angel,” Quint pointed out.

Theo tugged the comforter up to his chin again and shook his head. “Can’t. The blankets have accepted me as one of their own. If I leave now, I’ll lose their trust.”

Laughing, I said, “I’m sorry you won’t be able to come see Zain, too,” although part of me felt glad they wouldn’t meet under these particular circumstances. I was fairly sure Quint never told his husband the main purpose of the visit. He already thought Zain was weird enough.

A cab brought me from the Annapolis bus stop straight to the Academy. As it pulled up to Gate 1, I spotted Zain standing a little way down the wall of the Yard, between JJ and Platt. All of

them were wearing dark uniforms and white covers, and Zain had a backpack on. “Thanks,” I said to the driver as I climbed out with my suitcase.

“Babe!” Zain shouted. “You’re here!”

Before I could take more than two steps down the sidewalk, he practically tackled me with a hug. I dropped the handle of the suitcase, buried my face in his shoulder, and breathed deep, feeling everything slotting into its rightful place again. The natural order is off when he’s not with me. He didn’t loosen his hold until I did, and then he turned to the other two mids with one arm still around me and said, “Guys, come say hi to Seb!”

JJ walked over first, Platt trailing him. The larger plebe stuck one huge hand out and said, “My man!”

“Nope, *mine*, not yours,” said Zain, grinning. I elbowed his ribs and took JJ’s hand. From behind him, Platt watched the three of us with a faint line between his eyebrows.

“Hi,” I said them both. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“You too,” said JJ. Then he caught sight of something over my shoulder. “Oh, that’s my sponsor dad’s car. C’mon, Platypus, can’t keep him waiting.”

As he passed me, Zain explained, “J’s taking Platt to play video games today, finally. He invited us, too, but I told him we’ve got *different* games with which to entertain ourselves.”

“You did not!” I said, glancing at the other two mids to see if they overheard that. Platt’s face was a shade pinker than before as he got into the backseat of the car. I could only imagine what he must have been thinking.

JJ was leaning down to talk to the driver through the window. He straightened after a moment and called, “Yo, Mel says they’re having a cook-out tomorrow afternoon. Wanna come? You can meet Platt and me in front of the Chapel when church ends.”

Zain looked to me in question, and I nodded. “Love to,” he said. “See you there.”

“Sweet! Try not to wear yourselves out in the meantime,” said JJ, winking at me before opening the car door.

The moment he got in, I smacked Zain on the shoulder. “You *did* tell them!”

He rolled his eyes. “No, I didn’t have to. It’s pretty obvious what happens when a mid gets together with their significant other. Now!” Reaching under the collar of my shirt, he found the chain of the dog tags and pulled them out to lay in plain sight, a claim on me for anyone who

happened to look. Then he pressed a biting kiss to my lips and asked, “The hotel’s in walking distance, right?”

I nodded, croaking out the address through my suddenly-dry mouth.

He took the lead, bringing my suitcase and me both along with him. The Academy is set on the edge of the historic part of the city, where it’s all narrow, red brick streets lined with colorfully-trimmed storefronts. The charm of it was lost on me, though, as I thought about what he might have planned. Creativity isn’t a strength limited to artists. His imagination may not be as visual as mine, but it excels at strategizing and problem-solving, and right now, I knew it was entirely focused on making me forget my own name.

When we arrived at the inn, he had to nudge me to hand over my ID and credit card to the front desk agent. Then he slipped the room keycards into his own pocket and towed me to the elevator. The enclosed space concentrated the dominance emanating from him like a pheromone. My knees felt weak. I grabbed onto the railing to steady myself, and he smirked wickedly.

“Problem, my boy?”

Salaud, I thought. I had a moment of vindication, though, when we stepped onto our floor and he had to hold his cover in front of himself to hide the swell of his erection from the housekeeping staff. My jeans made my own less obvious, if more uncomfortable. Under my breath, I asked, “Problem, sir?” and he shot me a look that heated me from the inside out.

He tucked the cover under his arm to unlock the room door. Then, bringing his hand up to the back of my neck, right over the dog tags’ chain, he firmly steered me next to the bed before squeezing once and letting go. I knew to stay there as he retrieved my suitcase from the hall, took off his backpack, and closed the door.

“Do you have to eat?” he asked.

“No, sir,” I said. “I ate on the bus.”

Walking to stand in front of me again, he nodded in approval and crossed his arms over his chest. The movement made his biceps stand out more. “Eyes up here,” he said. I flushed as I tore my gaze away. There was faint amusement on his face, but none in his voice as he continued, “You, my boy, have been getting impudent. Just now in the hallway, for instance, and you sent that email I requested at exactly the wrong time, when I would see it and not be able to read it. I think you’ve been asking for a reminder of who’s in charge here, haven’t you?”

A whimper caught in my throat. He was right; I had challenged him on purpose, wanting to feel the force of his authority untempered by the usual playfulness. It’s not something I do often, and

the intensity of each previous time felt like a massive earthquake that still somehow only hinted at the true power below. *Shouldn't I be afraid of earthquakes?* I wondered.

"*Haven't* you?" he repeated, in a low voice that sent excitement and trepidation both zinging down my spine. It took a moment for me to recall exactly what the question was, while he waited, watching me closely.

"Yes, sir."

He nodded again before issuing a single order: "Strip."

I obeyed, my fingers shaking from lust as I yanked my clothes off as quickly as possible, until I stood before him in only the dog tags. My instinct was to cross my arms over myself, to hide my marks and the ribcage that I knew was pressing too clearly against my skin. Instead, I forced my hands by my sides. Zain was already frowning when I looked up.

"Who do you belong to, my boy?" he asked, studying my body.

"You, sir."

Stepping forward, he reached out and traced his fingertips across the line of one rib. I shivered at the touch, and at the tone of his voice as he said, "You will take care of what belongs to me."

"Yes, sir," I agreed. I wanted to tell him about how my new endo had called yesterday to schedule my first appointment, but he kissed me again, the fabric of his uniform sliding over my most sensitive spots, making me twitch. Then he drew away and gestured to the bed behind him.

"On your back," he commanded softly. "Spread-eagle, hands touching the headboard."

I licked the taste of him off my lips as I followed the order. Rather than joining me, he crossed the room to my suitcase and easily found the bottle of lubricant I had packed in a side pocket. I knew that was all there was in there, yet I half-expected him to produce rope to bind me as well. Whenever he had put me in a position like this before, he tied me down. This time, he turned back and took me in a moment before tapping my ankle.

"Wider. Wide as you can without pain, and keep your knees straight, toes pointed up. Yes, like that. As long as your hands are on the headboard, I don't care what you do with your arms, but your legs will not move."

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. There was a slight stretch in my inner thighs, yet the pose wasn't uncomfortable in any way. Maintaining it without anything holding me in place would take mental self-discipline more than physical. I wasn't sure I could do it.

Zain, watching my reaction as always, said, "If you move, I'll stop whatever I'm doing long enough for you to get back into place. Then I'll continue. The break might be a relief, or it might be the very last thing you want. Regardless, I am in charge, and I want you in this position. You shouldn't need ropes to obey me."

Truthfully, the ropes aren't what holds me in any case — not when I could safeword out of them whenever I need to. They only help create an illusion that allows me to submit. Now he wanted pure submission, with no aids, right off the bat. My mind fought the idea. I tensed and felt his hand on my knee as it raised from the mattress a quarter-inch.

"I know," he said. "Shhh, it's okay. I'm in charge."

He's in charge, I thought. That's nothing different. Relax. Relax.

Slowly, my muscles listened. "Yes, sir," I said, to show my acceptance and understanding.

"Good boy," he said, the first time he'd praised me since the start. I let my eyes fall close to bask in it a little.

A few moments after I did, the mattress bent with his weight. His bare skin brushed against mine as he climbed over one of my legs. I don't know how he undresses so quickly, but he was nude, kneeling between my thighs, when I parted my eyelids.

I watched him flip open the bottle of lube, squeeze some into his palms, and rub them together to warm it. My abs tensed when he wrapped one hand around me, slowly beginning to stroke. It wasn't going to take him long at all to get me at the first edge.

But then he let go.

Quickly, I checked my posture. My legs were straight and wide apart, just like he had instructed. "Sir?" I asked, frowning as I watched him dribble more lube onto his right hand.

"Shhh," he said. "I need to focus a minute."

Once he had closed the bottle and dropped it onto the sheets, he started to stroke me again, but with his left hand, his rhythm almost absent-minded. At the same time, he reached behind himself and—

Fuck.

My eyes went wide as I craned my head to see, until a small gasp from him made me look up to his face. His bottom lip was caught between his teeth, his gaze somewhere off in the distance. I

watched his hips rock back against his hand and his eyelashes flutter in response. It might have been an expression of pain.

“Z, you—”

“Sir,” he corrected.

“You haven’t done this in years, sir,” I reminded him. Not since we were still discovering each other’s bodies, and our own.

Smiling with the corner of his mouth, he leaned forward, bracing himself on my chest. The hand that had been wrapped around me slipped across my nipple, making a bright spot of pleasure against my concern for him.

“I’ve done this three times this week getting ready for you, *habibi*,” he said. “And trust me, I am going to take it very, very slowly. You just concentrate on staying nice and hard for me, hmm? Because you do *not* have permission to come while I ride you.”

“*Merde*.”

I didn’t realize the curse had slipped passed my lips until he tweaked my nipple again, harder, and said, “That wasn’t a ‘yes, sir.’”

“*Oui*, sir.”

“Good boy.” The whole time he’d been talking, he was opening himself up. Now he moved forward to straddle me. “I’m ready. Remember to stay where I want you, my boy.”

Then he tossed his head back, his body a long curve of muscles and sinew, and brought me inside him. A hundred years from now, I would be able to pick up a brush and paint exactly how he looked in that moment.

In the ones that followed, he pushed down steadily until, with a sound like the echo of an ancient warrior’s battle cry, he was seated fully on me. My fingers scrambled for purchase against the smooth wood of the headboard while I struggled to hold still. Suddenly, the position he’d put me in made sense. I could move my hips a few inches, but I had almost no leverage to thrust.

“Sir, sir, *s’il te plaît*,” I said, with no idea what I was begging for. He didn’t answer, anyway.

Several long seconds later, he rolled his head to look down at me through hooded eyelids. “My boy,” he declared, right before he started moving.

I don't think I could paint him then if I was given a hundred years to finish.

The washcloth was warm, and the texture combined with the pressure of his hand sent me teetering at the edge once more. "Oh *mes dieux*, can I come now, sir? Please? I was good."

"You were extremely good," he said, dropping a kiss on my navel. "And gorgeous. But no, you can't. We're working on a four-to-one ratio here. Four for me, and then it's your turn."

I stared up at him in shock. "Four?!"

Nodding, he dropped the washcloth on the floor and laid down next to me. "It was gonna be three-to-one if you had meowed at Quint. Told you you'd regret that."

"Why did it have to be four to begin with?" I asked, aware I was whining a little.

"Because that's how many times you came in a row a few weeks ago, remember?" he replied with a grin. "I'm not doing the without-stopping thing, though, because we've got the whole weekend, and unlike you, I have jerked off *a lot* recently."

I moaned.

He pulled me onto my side and produced a juicebox from somewhere on the nightstand. "Hey, feel lucky I decided to only match your record instead of breaking it. Drink."

This was going to be one of those times where the competitive streak he has drives me insane, I could tell.

I brought him to his fourth peak after we returned from a late dinner at a restaurant down the street, kneeling in front of him with my hands clasped behind my back as ordered and my hardness straining in the jeans he hadn't given me a chance to remove. The reason for that became clear when he rezipped his own fly, helped me to my feet, and immediately pinned me against the wall.

"Remember over Parents' Weekend when I said I wanted to see you come in your pants like this?" he asked, holding my head up with his fingers entwined in the hair at the base of my skull. "I'm giving you three minutes. If you can't manage to, you'll have to wait until I pound you through the mattress tomorrow morning."

I managed to.

Then he carried my boneless body to the shower and removed my clothes with soft touches, whispering praise in my ear as the water flowed over us both. Though I had wanted to draw him, I was already half-asleep by the time he placed me on the bed and crawled in next to me.

My first night in his arms since the start of Plebe Summer passed in dreams of our home in Hawaii. He took me again, as promised, when the sun rose, and granted my second release following his own. We lay there for a long time after, breathing in synch.

The Yard was beautiful in autumn. Fallen leaves dotted the grass and the brick walkways, a bit of Nature overtaking the neatness of everything. We arrived early, about a half-hour before the chapel service let out. The Academy's rules against PDAs meant we couldn't hold hands, but Zain was allowed to escort me with my arm through his as we strolled under the trees. He brought me to a small concrete bench surrounded on three sides by a hedge tall enough that you couldn't see over it while sitting down. The opposite side of the path it faced also had a hedge, so we were hidden from view unless someone passed directly in front of us.

"There's a few of these around the Yard," he said. "Steal my cover and put it on."

I frowned at the non-sequitur. "Why?"

"Because if a midshipman's sweetheart does that, the midshipman has to kiss them before they can get it back," he replied, grinning. "It's a tradition."

Sometimes I love military traditions.

Awhile later, I said, "Z, I...mm... I hear people coming this way."

Sighing, he reluctantly plucked the cover off my head, dropped it back onto his own, and stood. "Yeah, I think I see Platt and JJ," he said, peering in the direction of the Chapel. "C'mon, babe."

The other two plebes met us halfway. JJ said, "Yo, I gotta go back to the room and get a book my sponsor mom wanted to borrow before we leave. That cool with you guys?"

I nodded, and Zain said, "Yeah, sure. Babe, do you want to visit Memorial Hall while we wait?"

"I already have," I said. Thankfully, he didn't press. The real reason had more to do with not wanting to see the blank panels on the walls that were reserved for alumni from recent classes killed in the line of duty. The first time I'd set eyes on them, my brain had pictured Zain's name carved into the stone.

As we walked to Bancroft, JJ told us about playing video games with Platt the day before, gesticulating to demonstrate all the action. I gathered the blond midshipman had held his own, but he seemed unsure of what to do with the compliments JJ casually tossed his way.

We stopped next to the statue of Tecumseh. "Want me to grab anything for you?" JJ asked Zain, who shook his head. "Alright, five minutes, I swear." He turned and crossed T-court, veering to the side of the massive staircase to use one of the lower doors into the building.

Platt had stayed behind with Zain and me, yet he was looking off into the distance, as if he just happened to be standing nearby. I bit my lip, trying to think of what I might say to him.

Zain beat me to it. "Oh, c'mon, guys," he said, rolling his eyes. "You've been emailing each other for days. Can't you talk face to face?"

At that, the other plebe jerked his head up like he'd been hit and stared at us, wide-eyed, for a moment. "I- I forgot something in the Chapel."

Before I could respond, he was headed down Stribling Walk at a clip just short of a run. Zain started to go after him, frowning, and I caught his arm. "No, let me. He didn't know I told you about the other emails. He probably thinks you've read them."

He swore in Arabic. "I'm such an idiot! I didn't *think*."

"I'll explain to him and apologize," I said. "Wait here."

Platt had almost made it to the intersection of another walkway with the path, where a large monument stood surrounded by four cannons pointing upward at each corner. I ran after him and followed as he turned towards the Chapel.

"Hey!" I said, reaching out to his shoulder, but he was moving too fast for me to catch it.

Then, suddenly, he stopped dead. A man had materialized from nowhere in front of him. A young man with a beard and a menacing smile aimed squarely at Platt. "Hi, pissant," he said.

I was close enough to hear the plebe's whispered, "Belcher."

Grabbing his hand, I spun, intending to sprint to Zain, but there was resistance. Belcher had him by the other arm already. "Nice and quiet now. Gould, take care of that one," he said, and a midshipman emerged from the hedge to the side of the path, blocking my way.

There was another hidden bench. We'd gone right by it, and I'd been too focused on Platt to notice them lying in wait.

“This is Mohyeldin’s faggot,” Gould said, smirking at me. “What should I do with him?”

My heart pounded in my ears as Belcher said, “Is he? Well, maybe we should take him somewhere private, too.”

Still clutching Platt’s hand in mine, I put my back against his, inhaled a huge gulp of air, and shouted as loud as I could. “ZAAIIIN!”

Gould’s face twisted, and his fingers dug into my wrist painfully as he yanked me toward him. At the same time, Belcher started dragging Platt in the opposite direction, headed for a car parked by the Chapel. I couldn’t keep hold. If he managed to get to the car before Zain arrived...

A few years back, Zain had taught me some basic self-defense. He’d said something about the best way to yank out of an attacker’s hand. What was it? I never practiced any of it after that week. I’d thought it was ridiculous that he even insisted on teaching me. Without any better idea, I simply pulled against Gould with all my strength, so he had to step forward with one leg to keep his balance. But he didn’t let go. *Merde*.

Then I remembered a single piece of advice: *“If you have a choice, babe, go for the knees instead the groin. Not nearly as easy to block, and works on all sexes.”*

Raising my foot, I brought my heel down as hard as I could on Gould’s kneecap. He yelled and collapsed, rolling onto his back and clutching the joint to his chest.

The second I was free, I turned to help Platt, just in time to see Belcher go flying over his shoulder. The larger man landed heavily on the bricks of the pathway. Platt gave him no chance to recover. He was on him, pinning his upper body and twisting his attacker’s arm at an impossible angle. There was a gruesome *snap*. Belcher screamed in agony.

“SEB!”

I have never seen Zain run that quickly. It made me realize how little time there was between when I called for him and when he barrelled into me, holding me so tight I felt it in my core.

“I’m okay,” I said. My voice shook. “I’m okay.”

He let go abruptly and stepped back to sweep his eyes over me from head to toe, barking, “Did they touch you?”

“Gould did, but I’m not hurt, I swear,” I tried to reassure him.

On the ground, Gould started to roll over, like he was thinking about standing. Zain crossed to him in a stride and planted one foot in the center of his chest, pushing him onto his back again. "I would stay down, if I were you," he said, pleasantly.

I suddenly understood how my roommate could be scared of him.

Other people were coming up fast from all directions now. Without taking his weight off Gould, Zain pointed to the closest one and commanded, "You. Go get security."

By the stripes on his uniform, the mid was an upperclassman, yet he didn't bat an eye at a plebe giving him orders. I watched him rush away, and then glanced at Gould. His lips were pale.

"Z," I said, carefully stroking down his arm. "I'm okay. Platt needs help."

He looked over his shoulder at Platt and Belcher, still locked together, with Belcher making pathetic sounds of pain. "Seems like he's got it handled just fine from here."

"Please?" I asked. There were tears in my eyes. His face softened, finally, and he lifted his foot off Gould's chest. We left him on the ground, gasping in air, as I followed Zain to the other two.

He crouched next to Platt and gently said, "Hey, kid."

The blond seemed not to hear, until Zain touched his shoulder. Then he met his gaze.

Zain nodded. "Good job. You can let go now. He won't hurt you again."

Slowly, Platt released Belcher, who whimpered, and stood. He straightened his uniform. "I broke his arm," he said, like he couldn't quite believe it.

"Yep, you sure did," Zain agreed. "I guess JJ was right about how a male platypus has venom."

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was late evening before Seb and I had a moment's peace. We walked into the hotel room and he immediately put his leftover dinner from the restaurant into the mini fridge beneath the TV. He'd barely eaten half the meal. I was the one who asked for a container for the other half. He didn't argue.

I watched him take his bag into the bathroom and had an urge to tell him to leave the door open, but it came from the same place inside me that had made me press my foot down on Gould's chest, so I fought it and turned my attention to settling in for the night.

As I took my phone from my pants pocket to set on the nightstand, I noticed an email from Quint that had arrived hours ago, while we were still being questioned.

Dear Zain,

I'm planning to leave New York at five tomorrow afternoon, which would put my arrival in Annapolis around nine, assuming no unfavorable traffic conditions. Would that be alright? Seb told me your liberty expires at ten-thirty, and I wanted to have a buffer in case of delays, as well as time for us to talk.

*Kind regards,
Quint*

I shot off a quick message in response.

Hi,

Sorry I couldn't answer you before. Seb and I have been giving statements to cops and brass all day. The guys I told you about? They attacked him and my former roommate. Seb isn't hurt. Neither is the roommate. No worries.

Yes, nine would be fine. We're in room 202. You can just come on up.

–Zain

As I sent it, Seb came out of the bathroom, dropped his bag on the floor, and said, "I'm exhausted. Is it okay if I go to bed?"

"Of course, *habibi*." He'd been showing signs of a blood sugar high all afternoon, thanks to stress. No wonder he was worn out. I bit down on my tongue so I wouldn't ask if he'd done his

Lantus yet. *Stop. Do you want him thinking you've decided he can't take care of himself? Why else would he have taken all his supplies into the bathroom?*

He was giving me an odd frown.

"I'm pretty tired, too," I said. "Think I'll join you."

The look didn't go away, yet he said nothing else as he changed into pajamas while I stripped down to my underwear. We crawled between the sheets together, him with his back to me. A few inches of space separated us. After a minute, the need was too overwhelming. I pulled him against my chest with an arm wrapped around his waist and nipped the patch of skin under the chain of my dog tags as gently as I could.

Mine.

His breath caught, and then released in a long exhale that only took some of the tension out of his body. I could feel it even as he gradually fell asleep.

Trying to get some rest myself was futile. My mind was too busy replaying his terrified yell of my name. I clung to him tighter, until he shifted in my arms and made me realize I was going to wake him up. Carefully, I let go, rolling onto my back.

The phone buzzed from the nightstand. I grabbed it and answered before it could make more noise, barely registering Quint's name on the screen as I brought it to my ear. Whispering, "One second," I slid out of the bed and shut myself in the bathroom.

"Zain?" Quint asked. "There was an attack? Tell me what happened. And I would like an explanation a bit longer than 'no worries,' if you please."

I snorted under my breath. *Easy there, big guy. Getting all Toppo with me isn't going to work.* But on another level, it did help to be reminded that he cared about my Brat, too, and was probably feeling a lesser version of what I felt. Perhaps my email shouldn't've been so light on the details.

"We're all okay," I said, making my voice as reassuring as possible while still being quiet. "The only ones who got hurt were the attackers. Seb's sleeping now, or I'd let you talk to him and hear for yourself."

"Tell me what happened," he repeated.

I leaned against the wall, looking at my reflection illuminated by a strip of recessed lighting over the mirror, and recounted the attack from my perspective, as well as what Seb and Platt had said took place when we gave our statements to the security forces who arrived on the scene.

“At first, they thought we had assaulted Belcher and Gould, not the other way around, but there were enough mids who saw it from a distance to back up that it was self-defense.”

Quint sounded calmer as he said, “That was brazen of them, to attack in broad daylight.”

“Not to mention on a military installation that Belcher was banned from when he got kicked out,” I agreed. “He used a fake ID to gain access. It was the only place and time they could do it, though. Platt hasn’t left the Yard alone since the start of the academic year, and he was their main target. They knew he always goes to church at the Chapel on Sundays, so they waited for him outside it, with Gould’s car parked nearby. I’m not sure where they were planning to drive. Cars are checked as they exit the Yard, but there’s plenty of out-of-the-way places to take someone without needing to pass through a gatehouse.” I felt sick, thinking about what could’ve happened then. “If I had stayed with Platt and Seb rather than letting them go off on their own—”

“You couldn’t have guessed, Zain,” Quint interrupted, “and they are not hurt. Keep reminding yourself of that.”

Not physically, anyway, I thought. Turning away from the mirror, I said, “Gould knew who Seb was. I heard one of the guards say they’d seen him hanging around Gate 1 yesterday, where I met Seb with Platt and JJ. The bastard was watching us.”

“I’m assuming he’s in jail?”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah. They both had to be treated for their injuries, but now they’re in a cell awaiting arraignment.”

“Good. You have to stop worrying about them and what could have been. Focus on Seb. He needs you now. Understand?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, drily.

There was a pause. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, don’t be, you’re right,” I cut him off. “And speaking of that, I want to get back to him. Thank you.”

“Let me know if I can help in any way,” he said, gentler. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I wished him a good night, went back to the bed, and spooned up behind Seb once more. Holding him, feeling his warmth, I was able to sleep.

*

He wasn't near when I woke. There was a split second of gutting fear before I caught sight of him curled in the armchair facing the foot of the bed, absorbed in drawing something. I took a few careful, slow breaths to calm myself without bringing his attention to me. Then I stretched and yawned a little, and he looked up.

"Hey, *habibi*. How long have you been awake?"

Glancing guiltily at the alarm clock on the nightstand, he said, "Um... a few hours, maybe."

I blinked. I had expected one hour, at most. The attack, and my reaction to it, must've freaked him out even more than I'd thought. "Okay," I said. "Wanna stay here and finish that while I go get us breakfast?"

The strange expression from the night before returned. Like I'd just told him I had two heads, and he was trying to figure out where I'd hidden the other one.

"Babe? Breakfast?"

His bony shoulders rose and fell in little jerks. Taking that as a yes, I got dressed, told him I'd be twenty minutes, and left to hunt down something high-calorie for him to ingest.

I ordered an assortment of his favorites from the cafe up the street and carried them back to the room in a brown paper bag. "Omelettes and crêpes and fruit, oh my!" I said, setting it on the armoire next to the television. "And pancakes for me, of course."

From the armchair, where he was still focused on his sketchbook, he said, "I'm actually not hungry right now. You can put mine in the fridge."

It was as if I was waking for a second time — from a very weird dream where I was no longer a Top, but he was still most definitely a Brat.

"...Oh, I see."

My tone was half-amused, yet his head jerked up and his eyes went wide even before I started across the room to him.

"Wh— I— Zain!"

"Congratulations," I said at the same time, as I snatched the colored pencil and sketchbook, set them aside, and grabbed his arm to bring him with me to the end of the bed. "You've succeeded in shaking me out of it."

Then, tugging his pants down so fast he had no time to think of doing it himself, I pulled him straight over my leg and began to spank.

He bit the arm I wasn't holding almost immediately. "Stop that," I said, not pausing for a second. "Give it here."

When he obeyed, I pinned it down to his back and shifted him to make aiming for his upper thighs easier. He yelped and twisted as I peppered that area with swats. The sound of choked cries soon followed. I only stopped when he was openly sobbing, though. I didn't want to leave him confused and unsure again, and he was going to learn that there were better ways to get my attention.

Finally, I asked, "Ready to eat?" resting my palm up higher on his butt, over his injection sites. He nodded, so I let him up. "Out of those." I gestured to the pajama pants around his ankles, and he took a small step forward, leaving them behind and bringing him right up against me as I stood. I dropped a kiss on his forehead while he sniffled and wiped tears off his cheeks. "C'mon, brat, get your kit," I said.

"Are you going to...?"

With a shake of my head, I answered, "Nah, you can do it yourself. This time."

He looked relieved. I almost felt like I should warn him, but it wouldn't be nearly as effective if I did. So I simply watched as he did the test and injection, and then I collected the paper bag of food in one hand and him in the other and brought them both to the armchair.

"Z?" he asked, uncertain.

Sitting, I put the food down on the side table. Then I patted my thigh. "Straddle me, babe."

From the horrified face he made, that was probably when he figured it out. Yet he did as I requested, kneeling over me. I moved forward and spread my legs so his red bottom didn't rest directly on them. It took a little maneuvering to get the food containers arranged where I could easily cut off pieces. He sat bolt upright in my lap while I did, frowning and wiggling like he wanted to stand but didn't quite dare. I let him. When I started to bring the first bite of omelette to his lips, though, and he tried to take the fork from me, I reached down with my free hand and swatted hard.

"Ow! Zain!"

"I thought you said you were ready to eat?" I asked, tipping my chin and giving him a puzzled look. "Wanna go back over my knee instead?"

“Noooo...”

“Would it be easier if I made airplane noises?”

“NO!”

Laughing at his outraged scowl, I said, “Well, keep your hands away and let me feed you.”

He stared at me a moment longer, and then opened his mouth on a huff. I popped the omelette into it and rubbed my free hand over his lower back while he chewed.

Bit by bit, both his food and mine disappeared, taking his glower and rigidity with it. After I set the fork down for the last time, I ran my thumb across his cheekbone and wished that he never had to get up, that we could just stay here and I could take care of him forever.

“I almost lost you yesterday,” I said, “and then I put on kid gloves because I didn’t want to make you scared of me again.”

Now he really did look like I’d grown a second head. “*What?* I wasn’t scared of you.”

Frowning, I asked, “You sure? Pass me your sketchbook and I’ll draw a picture of you when I wouldn’t get off Gould. It’s etched in my brain.”

“I’m sure,” he insisted. “What you saw was fear *for* you, not of you. I was worried you were going to accidentally kill him.”

I had to take a moment just to hold him, both my arms gently squeezing his body, before I made myself say, “If I had killed him, it wouldn’t have been an accident. I wanted to. I wasn’t going to, but I wanted to very badly.” Then I loosened my grip, expecting him to jerk away.

Instead, he pushed closer and returned the embrace. “That’s okay,” he said.

“That’s *okay?* Babe, did you hear me just now?”

“Yes.”

I waited, and when he said nothing else, I echoed his own words from several days ago back to him. “You’re a pacifist. You’re a vegetarian. You don’t let me kill *spiders.*”

He drew away enough to look at me at point-blank range. “Yes, and I’m in love with a Marine. You just said you weren’t going to kill Gould. I trust you. I also know you might *have* to kill someone in the future. If I couldn’t accept the idea of that, I wouldn’t be with you, Zain.”

I blinked against the moisture in the corners of my eyes, and then clutched him as hard as I wanted to for the first time since the day before, one hand on his back, the other on his thigh, my face burrowed into his shoulder and his palm cupping my neck.

After a moment, he added, “Also, spiders never tried to kidnap me,” and I snorted with laughter.

JJ texted me while we were still in the armchair. His sponsor parents had delayed their cookout when they heard what had happened, and they wanted us to come. I started to politely decline the invitation, seeing as Seb and I were already forced to be with others for almost a full day of our time together, but he stopped me, saying, “I want to go.”

“You sure, babe?”

“Platt will be there, won’t he? I have something to give him.” He nodded to his sketchbook where I’d set it earlier. “It’s the drawing. I still need to put the finishing touches on it, if... that’s alright?”

I smiled. Asking for permission was a good sign. I don’t interfere with his art unless he’s using it to hide or stressing out over it specifically, though, and I knew that hadn’t been what was bugging him this morning.

“Okay. Just be quick. We’ve only got an hour until they’ll be here to pick us up,” I said, and he crawled off my lap while I texted JJ back.

They met us in front of the hotel. Mel, JJ’s sponsor dad, was driving, with JJ in the passenger seat and Platt in the back. I took the middle, and Seb sat on my other side. As we shut the door, Mel said, “Ah, the other hero of the hour! Are you sure you wouldn’t like to join the military, young man?”

“Me?” Seb asked, his usual help-strangers-are-talking-to-me face overcast with bafflement. “I’m not a hero.”

“No?” Mel asked. “From what I understand, you sounded the alarm and then disabled one attacker.”

“Yeah, you were a boss,” JJ added, reaching a fist over his shoulder. “Give it to me.”

“But I didn’t know what I was doing!” Seb protested. “I was just lucky.”

Platt leaned over me and spoke in a low voice, so Mel and JJ couldn't hear him. "You were brave," he told Seb. "I was too scared to even fight back until you yelled."

"You were brave, too," said Seb, leaning on my other side, "and you fought a lot better than I did."

Shrugging, Plaid said, "That was only training kicking in, not bravery."

I shook my head. "It takes courage to remember your training and use it when you're scared. Both of you were brave, and I'm proud of each of you."

They sat back in their seats with adorable twin blushes. I was about to make a joke about being the filling of a hero sandwich when JJ said, "If one of y'all doesn't give me some love..."

Laughing, I completed the fistbump, and then steered the conversation towards video games for the rest of the drive. JJ took up the change of subject enthusiastically. We were deep in a debate on Halo verses Call of Duty when we arrived at the house.

Mel and his wife, Sue, lived outside town, in a wooded area with one of the many creeks that branched off the Chesapeake Bay bordering their backyard. Seb's eyes went wide when he saw it. I could tell he was itching to explore, so as soon as it was polite, I asked our hosts, "Do you mind if we take a walk down by the water there?"

"Oh, go ahead," said Sue. "It's a lovely spot for a stroll. You can roll up your pant legs and wade a little, too, if you like. We'll ring the bell when it's time to eat."

Thanking her, I took Seb's hand. He gestured subtly to Platt, standing across the patio, before patting his bag. The drawing was in it, I remembered. "So ask him if he wants to join us," I said in an undertone, rolling my eyes. "He won't bite."

Seb made a face, but led me over to the kid and said, "Um, I, uh, wanted to talk to you. Could you— would you mind coming with Zain and me? It won't take long."

Platt looked between us questioningly. I smiled. Putting his can of soda down, he stuck his hands in his pockets and said, "Okay."

We walked down to the bank of the creek, and then along it, deeper into the woods. Once we were far out of earshot of the house, Seb started talking, though he was watching his feet rather than Platt. "First, I wanted to let you know that Zain hasn't read any of your emails to me or my replies, and I'm sorry I told him about them without asking you. That's what I was trying to explain yesterday when Belcher and Gould showed up."

"It's alright," Platt said. I could barely hear him from Seb's other side. "He's the one who gave me your email address, and I told him about the first one. I should've assumed he'd know of the others, too."

"Are you sure?" Seb asked, glancing at him. "You seemed upset about it."

Platt stopped and turned to look at the creek babbling over the rocks. We waited next to him until he said, "I was... confused. And scared. I still am, a little. Not as much."

"What are you confused and scared about?" I asked. "Maybe we could help."

"You have already," he replied, ducking his head and looking sideways at me. "Knowing what I know about you two, and then watching you interact... I kept looking for cruelty, or thinking you must see him as below you, but you aren't like that at all." He paused and then addressed Seb. "You said there's... there's strength in it."

"Yes," Seb said. "It's not weakness that makes me submit to him. It's willingness. It takes courage to master all the fearful parts of yourself and trust completely in another person."

"And for me, knowing he trusts me so much can be overwhelming and terrifying, too," I put in, squeezing my boy's hand a little in mine. "I have to embrace that fear and understand it in order to truly live up to the honor of his submission and be the best dominant I can be. We balance each other."

"Like yin and yang," Platt said.

Seb nodded. "Each part contains a piece of the other."

The kid bit his lip and studied the creek again. Seb looked to me uncertainly.

"Why don't you give him the drawing, babe?" I said.

That brought Platt's attention to us again. He watched Seb open his bag and slide the sheet of paper out of his sketchbook.

"It's not exactly a mandala," he said, holding it out. "I can tell you where to find those online, if you want, so you can color your own. This is just something that I started awhile ago, and this morning, I finished it and wanted to give it to you."

It was the head of a lion, beautiful and powerful, but covered in abstract, multicolor patterns, unlike anything I'd seen Seb draw before.

Platt frowned at it. "For me to keep?"

“Yeah, if you want,” Seb said. “I’m sorry I don’t have a frame for it, and I know Zain and JJ are calling you a platypus now, so maybe that would’ve been a more appropriate symbol, but–”

“Thank you.”

Seb looked taken aback for a moment, before he smiled. “You’re welcome. Here, you can use this to keep it safe.” He took a folder from his bag and placed the drawing inside it, then handed it over to Platt.

A bell rang out from the house. “It’s a little early for food, isn’t it?” I asked, frowning at my watch. Nonetheless, we started back. As we stepped through the trees, I caught site of two new people who had joined JJ and his sponsor parents on the patio. Neither of them were in uniform, yet they were easily recognizable. I frowned again. “How did Cameron and Myrick know we’re here?”

“I– I told them,” Platt said, sounding surprised to see them, too. “They emailed me this morning.”

The upperclassmen were walking down the slope of grass to meet us. Platt and I came to attention as they approached.

“As you were,” said Cameron. With barely a glance to me or Seb, she asked Platt, “Are you okay?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said, still at attention despite being given permission to relax.

Cameron reached out like she was going to grip his shoulder before letting her hand drop to her side. “They called us at my parents’ house yesterday,” she said, “but we couldn’t get back until today. We’ve just been giving our statements.”

“Have you heard anything about the arraignments, ma’am?” I asked.

She shook her head. Then, looking to Myrick first, she said, “They searched Gould’s car and found duct tape and knives stashed in it, which adds to the charges. It’s likely they’ll be sentenced to ten years, at least.”

Seb shuddered. I pulled him closer to my side so I could wrap an arm around him and kiss his temple. I felt chilly, realizing how close I really might have come to losing him.

Platt had gone a few degrees paler, too. Cameron did put a hand on his shoulder then, and Myrick took the other one. “We can’t stay long,” he said. “We just wanted to make sure you’re all okay.”

"I'm okay, sir. Ma'am," Platt told them.

Myrick nodded. "I can see that. I wish I had been there yesterday, though. From what I heard, your throw was perfect."

Color came back to the kid's face in the form of a blush. "Thank you, sir," he said, as Cameron smiled.

I saw Myrick's hand squeeze his shoulder one last time before he let go. "Well, we should be leaving."

"Accompany us to the car, Platt," Cameron said, with a hint of humor coloring the order.

"Aye aye, ma'am."

After they walked away, Seb turned to me and raised an eyebrow. "Zain."

"What?"

He crossed his arms and said nothing.

"*What?*" I repeated. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You really can't see what's going on there?" he asked. I frowned, and he huffed and lowered his voice to say, "Platt has a crush on them."

"*BOTH* of them?!"

"Shh!"

We glanced simultaneously over to see if Platt, Myrick, or Cameron were looking back at us, but they were on the patio now, being waylaid by Mel and Sue. I narrowed my eyes as Cameron laughed at something Mel was saying.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"How do you *not* know?" Seb demanded. "Look how he is with them."

Tilting my head, I watched Platt move a step closer to the other two and flush again when they smiled down at him. "And they..."

"Return the feelings, I'm pretty sure," said Seb.

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

I blinked a few times. "I mean... I suspected something was going on with Myrick," I said, "but not Cameron." Still, I couldn't argue, now that he'd pointed it out to me. On top of the trust I have for Seb's judgement, I could see it for myself in the way the three of them stood, the upperclassmen on either side of the kid, like they were a single unit. "So. When he was acting pissed at them—"

"He'd probably just started to realize how he felt," Seb said, "and he didn't know how to deal with it. His default reaction is anger. Or it used to be. It seems like maybe he's starting to move past that now."

"Huh." It made sense. It also made me sad, though. "*Habibi*," I said, gently, "that's good to know, but it's impossible for those three to have a relationship."

"Yeah, the military doesn't support polyamory, does it?" he asked, and I shook my head.

"Not just that. They're upperclassman, and Platt's a plebe. Even them being here like this could be considered an unprofessional level of friendliness and get them all in trouble for fraternization. He can't date either one of them until next year, by which time Cameron will be graduated and shipped off miles away."

Seb's eyebrows came together in a small wrinkle. "Well, the distance isn't a barrier if they work at it. We prove that. He's probably not ready to admit he wants to date them yet, anyway. Maybe we could use this year to help him get to that point."

"Assuming he still has a crush on them by the end of it," I said.

"I don't think it's going away anytime soon."

Across the yard, Cameron and Myrick shook hands with the older couple and then walked around the corner of the house with Platt tagging along between, gesturing with one hand as he spoke. Watching them, I thought Seb's judgement was probably right again.

Mel drove us back to the hotel in the afternoon. The first thing I did when we came into our room was call Seb's family. There hadn't been time to do it yesterday, and then we had to wait for it to be daylight in California.

They reacted about how I had expected — demanding to speak with Seb and asking him a million times if he was hurt until I confiscated the phone and took over reassuring them, shooing him into the shower with my other hand.

I joined him there after I finally satisfied the McKenna Crews clan. He turned as I climbed in and said, “We shouldn’t have told them about it.”

I snorted. “Right, brat, because that would be so good for your stress. They’re not worried anymore. Relax.” Then I set about making sure he did just that, while driving all thoughts of his family out of his head.

It was a long process. By the time I finished, we needed to get dinner. We brought it up to the room again, though I let him feed himself after he promised he would eat it all. He did. Then we curled up on the bed together, lazily making out.

At nine, he started to roll away, saying, “I should pack. Quint will be here any—”

There was a knock on the door.

“—minute,” he finished.

“That’s impressive,” I said, getting up to answer it while Seb hurriedly straightened his clothes.

The taller Top smiled when I opened the door. “Hello. I hope I’m not too early.”

“You’re *exactly* on time,” I told him as I stepped aside to let him in. “Did you teleport or something? I couldn’t do that, and I’ve got military training.”

“I left a bit before I had planned,” he said. “Hello, Seb.” It was quick, but I saw him give my Brat one scrutinizing look from head to toe. “Zain told me what happened. How are you?”

“I’m fine,” said Seb, and then swiftly added, “I mean, I’m not hurt, and I’m calm.”

“Now,” I said. To Quint, I clarified, “We were both a little thrown this morning. I wasn’t reacting the way I should have. Seb fixed it.”

He nodded. “Good.”

The three of us stood awkwardly for a moment, and then I said, “Okay, I imagine you might have actually *wanted* to swat me when I sent you that email that explained nothing, so here’s your chance.”

“*Zain*,” said Seb, dropping down on the edge of the mattress and giving me a pained look.

Quint smiled a little. "While you aren't wrong about that," he told me, "I would like to talk, first."

"Sure," I replied, easily. Sitting beside Seb, I gestured the older man to the armchair across from us. Once he looked comfortable, I said, "So the first thing you should know is, this is just setting it up. Seb hasn't actually given his consent yet, and we'd also need Theo's okay."

"We have it," Quint said. "I spoke to him yesterday, though I didn't tell him exactly what would be taking place here. He was under the impression that physical discipline was already a part of the arrangement, actually, and he's fine with it."

Next to me, Seb squirmed. I rested my arm across his shoulders. "Great, that's one hurdle. I was also thinking about other things you might need to do. I like having options. Babe, look at me."

He met my eyes reluctantly, both his cheeks bright red.

"What do you think of Quint being able to tell you to color a mandala, or asking to see your meter logs?"

I saw his gaze flick to the other Top, who was watching us placidly, before he answered. "Yeah, okay."

"Mandalas are a soothing mechanism," I explained to Quint. "They're very helpful. The meter logs you should only ask to see if you suspect he's hiding his levels from you."

He nodded. "With Theo, I sometimes send him to stand in a corner, as a place with minimal distractions, to think or calm himself. Seb, would that help you as well?"

Seb was quiet for so long, I was tempted to interject. I didn't want him feeling like we were excluding him from the conversation, though, so I simply squeezed his shoulders and waited. Finally, he said, "If... if Theo would get sent to the corner for some reason, I should be, too. Especially if he's around."

Quint was shaking his head before I could. "No, you're not the same. You have different needs, and Theo understands that. There might be times I would send you both to corners, but it would be only if that was appropriate for each of you."

"I'm glad we agree," I said. "Babe, is that a yes on the corner, if it's what *you* need?"

He nodded, flushing darker.

"Okay," I said. To Quint, I asked, "Is there anything else you can think of?"

“Not at the moment.”

“Awesome. Stand up a minute, babe. I need to show him where he can aim.”

“Zain! You do not!”

“Do so,” I said, and tilted my head to give him a smile. Quint might be a doctor, but I was going to be sure my Brat was in knowledgeable hands.

Making a face, Seb stood.

I took his elbow, turning him away from the other Top. “His injection sites are here,” I said, pointing them out on each side. “Leave at least a few inches between them and your target. More if it’s close to a time for him to do an injection. I generally just stick to the undercurve, and you can go down onto his thighs a little if you need to. From about here to here is safe.”

Quint nodded, and I let go of Seb, who immediately spun around and sat down again with his hands beneath him, glowering.

“Well, I think it’s time for the main event,” I said, standing myself now. “Babe, do you want to witness this, or—”

“Yes,” he said, before I could even finish the question.

I laughed. “Okay, fair enough.”

Quint was getting to his feet as well. “How would you like to do this?” he asked me. He seemed very broad-shouldered, suddenly.

“When I’m testing something, I usually do at least four swats, fairly hard,” I said. “Two in one spot clothed, and two in another spot unclothed. That way I get a good idea of what a single or a repeated use of it feels like. So I guess we can start with clothed?”

“Alright.”

I turned and leaned over the edge of the bed next to Seb, resting on my forearms. It was tall enough that that put the bend of my waist at a ninety-degree angle. Looking back over my shoulder, I said, “Pick your spot, my good man.”

Quint tapped my left sit-spot with two fingers. “There.”

“Kay. Fire when ready,” I said, and he raised an eyebrow at me before bringing his palm down across the seat of my uniform pants. It stung sharply, a bit more than I had expected. I controlled my reaction, and my voice was even as I said, “Second one, same place.”

He complied, rocking me forward on my toes. After the worst of the smart died down, I straightened, my hands going to my fly. Seb caught one of them. “Z, you don’t have to do this,” he said, looking up at me worriedly.

Grinning, I tousled his hair. “What happened to your desire for revenge?”

“When is he ever going to be swatting me with my pants down?” he asked, ignoring that.

“Swatting, probably never, but I don’t want to have to repeat this before he can spank you,” I said. “You can go out in the hall if you want.”

He shook his head, letting go of me, so I finished lowering my pants and bent back over.

“Same spot on the other side?” Quint asked.

“Yep, and you don’t have to wait for me to prompt you,” I said. “Use the speed you’d have for a spanking.”

“Alright,” he said, calmly, about the same time his hand cracked down, and then, with hardly a pause for me to catch my breath, struck again. I bit back a cry as my flesh ignited. Quickly, I stood, reaching back to rub the sting away before I remembered that me feeling it was the whole point of this.

“That was good,” I said, doing up my pants. “You’re officially an approved implement.”

“No, we’re not done yet,” Quint said, and I looked at him in surprise. Smiling, he added, “I always give a hug afterward, and this has already been strange enough for me. Would you mind?”

“Not at all,” I laughed. His hug was a lot gentler than his swats. When he let go, I turned to Seb. “So, babe, what do you think? Do you consent?”

He looked from Quint to me while fidgeting with the hem of his t-shirt. “Well... I wouldn’t want you to have gone through that for nothing.”

Quint shook his head. “I’ll need a more clear statement than that, *mon chaton*.”

Seb blushed, but stood up and looked Quint straight in the eye. “Yes, I consent to you swatting me.”

“Thank you,” Quint said. “There was one other thing I forgot earlier. Theo and I also discussed our Monday dinners. We would both like for you to come over on Wednesdays instead, and also stay with us on weekends, from your last class on Friday to the first class on Monday.”

I wanted to hug him again. He’d just saved me from trying to float that same plan without Seb getting the wrong idea. Seb, though, immediately said, “No, that’s too much! I’ll be in the way all the time, and you’ll both get sick of me. We don’t need more than the weekly dinners. I’m fine.”

Quint and I exchanged a look. Then I stepped to one side, so I wasn’t between them, to watch. He took my Brat by the upper arm, turned him, and landed a hard swat perfectly in the middle of the area I’d pointed out. Seb yelped. Not letting go, Quint spun him back and said, “We will not get sick of you. You are welcome, and you will stop these insinuations. Am I clear, young man?”

“*Oui, monsieur,*” Seb said, with a wide-eyed nod.

As Quint gave him a longer hug than he’d given me, I smiled and added, “Oh, and you *are* staying there on the weekends, brat.”

I heard him sigh into Quint’s chest, but there were no arguments.

Epilogue

The common room of the apartment looked almost spacious without Mark and Calvin's loveseat or TV. I had cleaned it, and then smudged the whole place with sage — very carefully, so as not to set off the fire alarms — after Quint and Theo dropped me off. There was room to breathe, now.

As I carried the portrait through it on my way to the front door, I heard the Skype ringtone. Sighing, I propped the canvas against a wall and backtracked to my room. He was going to make me late.

"Oh, good!" Zain said when I answered. "I was hoping to catch you before you went over for dinner. There's a company meeting tonight, so I wouldn't have been able to talk later."

"I was just about to leave," I said. "They'll be expecting me in a few minutes."

He pulled out his phone and said, "I'll text Quint that I'm holding you up. It won't be long, just need to tell you some stuff. There, all set."

"What stuff?"

"The expanded version of what the meeting's about," he said, smiling. "There've been all kinds of rumors floating around, so they're filling everyone in with the basic details of what happened with Belcher and Gould. First of all, neither of them are getting out."

"You know that for sure?" I asked, hardly daring to hope it was true, and Zain nodded.

"The cops got a forensic computer guy to dig deep into Belcher's laptop. He'd tried to delete everything, but they recovered the photo that was left for Platt and me, along with most of the ones that were sent to Cameron last year, and emails between him and Gould that outline what they were plotting."

I shuddered. "Did you read the emails?"

"No," he said, "and I don't plan to, even if I get a chance. The point is, with all the evidence against them, they took plea deals. Seven years behind bars, at least, for each of them. More if they aren't model prisoners."

That meant by the time they got out, we would be far away from Annapolis. "Good," I said, as relief washed over me. "How's Platt?"

Zain grinned. "I think he's caught between being embarrassed at all the positive attention he's getting and really enjoying it. Poor kid's still got no idea what to do with the concept of having friends, even with JJ and I trying to show him how it's done. I saw him just a little while ago, and he said he was going to a counseling session. Those seem to be helping."

"I'm glad," I said. "That reminds me, I confirmed my first appointment with the psychologist at the diabetes center. It's going to be on Friday afternoon."

"Excellent!" he said. "Maybe Quint can meet you there to start your weekend together? You should ask him tonight."

Sighing, I said, "I don't need to make him go out of his way to escort me."

Zain blinked, slowly, and gave me an inquisitive look. "I thought it was right across from his hospital. How would that be 'out of his way,' exactly?"

My bottom clenched as I dropped my gaze to the keyboard. "You know what I mean," I muttered.

"Yep, sure do," he replied, cheerful, "and you're lucky neither Quint or I are in that room with you." Ignoring my tiny squeak of protest, he went on, "Speaking of, I've got this morbid curiosity... who swats harder?"

Without even thinking about it, I said, "You."

"Really?" Zain asked, his eyebrows rising.

"Not that you swat *too* hard," I said, quickly. "Or that— that Quint is gentle."

He laughed. "Babe, believe me, I *know* he's not gentle."

"There isn't much of a difference, probably."

With an eyeroll, he said, "There's enough of one for you to give a definite answer the second I asked. Relax. I am not worried that I've been harsh with you. I was surprised, is all."

"It's just..." I paused, trying to figure out how to explain. "You tend to give everything a hundred and ten percent of your effort, right off the bat? And Quint, I think, sort of starts at ninety percent and goes up if that doesn't work."

"A less effective strategy, but it's his prerogative," said Zain, shrugging.

It was still pretty damn effective, if you asked me.

Zain grinned again, most likely reading my mind, and added, “You should head over there. Don’t want dinner getting cold.”

“Yeah,” I said. “*Je t’aime.*”

“Love you, too, *habibi.*”

Theo opened the door when I knocked, with Jagger bouncing at his heels. He caught sight of the wrapped canvas as he stepped back to let me in, and asked, “What, are you bringing homework over?”

I shook my head and entered, reaching down to pet the dog. “It’s, um, not for school.” Quint was standing by the peninsula. Holding the painting up sort of halfway between them, I asked, “Can you— would you open it? Both of you?”

“A gift, *mon chaton?*”

I ducked my head as the Top reached out and took it from me with a smile. “It’s probably too big,” I said, “and you won’t have anywhere to hang it. If you don’t like it, you can tell me. I won’t be hurt, I promise.”

Theo was already next to his husband, tearing the plain white paper off eagerly and letting it drop to the floor. When the canvas was bare, he looked at it a moment, and then at me.

“Seb.”

His voice sounded strange, kind of choked. Beside him, Quint was still studying the portrait. I moved around so I could see it, too, needing to check one last time for errors in my composition.

It had been a tricky perspective. The viewer was about where the armchair sat in the living room, looking at the couch from an angle. I’d painted Quint at the far end of it, his legs crossed and resting on the coffee table. He gazed down at Theo, who was stretched out along the cushions, using his husband’s right thigh as a pillow the way I’d seen him do several times. The younger man lay on his side, facing the TV, but with his head turned partway to meet Quint’s eyes. Jagger was curled up next to him. I’d tried to make it seem like they were in the middle of a conversation, laughing over a private joke, so both men looked happy. One of Quint’s hands rested on Theo’s hip. The other was lightly tangled into his auburn hair.

“Like I said, it’s probably—”

“Seb, stop right there,” Quint cut me off firmly, and I blinked and swallowed. He gave the painting to Theo so he could take me by both shoulders. “It’s perfect.”

“It really is,” said Theo, sniffing a little. “Jeez, now you’ve made *both* of us cry with your art. I hope you’re happy.” But he was smiling as he wiped his eyes.

Looking from him to Quint, who also seemed a bit misty, I said, “I needed to make something to thank you. I’m... I’m glad you like it.”

“We love it,” Quint replied. “We have a gift for you, as well, although I’m afraid it doesn’t live up to this one. Angel, where is it?”

“One second.” Putting the portrait carefully down on the counter, Theo walked over to the hooks next to the door and took something out of his jacket before coming back to stand with Quint in front of me. “It’s not wrapped,” he said. “Hold your hand out.”

I did, and he put his closed fist over it, then opened his fingers to let the object drop into my palm. It was a metal keychain, shaped like a flattened teardrop.

“This goes our apartment,” said Quint, pointing to the key attached to it. “The fob will open the door of the lobby downstairs.”

English and French both abandoned me, leaving me wordless. They thought this wasn’t as good as the painting?

After a couple of seconds, Theo said, “We were going to give it to you right when you got back from Annapolis, but our spare fob was leather, and we didn’t think you’d like that, so we had to ask the building for a different one.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat and managed to say, “*Merci*.”

“You are welcome,” Quint replied.

The double meaning behind that simple phrase hit me at my very center. I was welcome here. Physical proof was laying in my hand, with undeniable weight. I curled my fingers around the keychain and held it a moment more. Then I put it into my pocket.

The End

Extras

[Originally, this story was going to alternate between all four points of view. I soon decided that would be too complicated. However, some parts just begged for Quint or Theo's take. Think of these like the deleted scenes of a DVD — some short; some long; none really necessary to understand the story, but good if you want extra insight.]

Disagreements

I had been in a bad mood since I got home from band practice. We'll get to why in a bit, but first let it be noted that Quint is a complete, hopeless neatfreak. Like, he could give Monica from *Friends* a run for her money. He'd asked me to do laundry that morning because it was "piling up," by which he meant the hamper was *almost* three-quarters full.

He reminded me again as soon as I walked in the door from practice, and when I scowled and made it perfectly clear what I thought of that in every non-verbal way I knew, he didn't even have the courtesy to do anything Toppish. Instead, he said, "Thank you, angel," as if I'd sweetly agreed, and went back into the office to keep working.

A few hours later, the laundry still wasn't done, and I decided to go busking. I needed to get in more solo practice, with the way things were going with the band. Plus, I'd probably run into Seb and could check on how Quint's birthday present was coming. The kid seemed to spend a lot of time in the park. I felt kind of bad for him. He looked like he might be lonely.

But Quint must've heard me open the pantry to get my shoes out. "Theo?" he called. "Come here, please."

Huffing, I went and poked my head into the office, with Jagger following at my heels. "What?"

"Please put in a load of laundry before you go anywhere," he said.

"I'll do it *later*."

He looked at me, calmly, for a couple of seconds, and then said, "Alright, you can do it later. Right now, you can put your nose in that corner." And he nodded towards the one behind the door, where I would be in his line of sight as he worked.

I, feeling like I had a point to prove, crossed my arms, stuck out my chin, and stayed exactly where I was. I didn't actually say 'no,' because that is a surefire way to get my mouth washed out, but I might as well have.

Quint quirked an eyebrow. "One."

My better instincts were telling me to do what he wanted, fast. I ignored them.

In the exact same mild tone, he said, "Two."

That's when a combination of panic and an ugly emotion I can't name made me snap.

"I'm *not* your fucking houseboy!" I shouted, and when Quint was too shocked to react immediately, I reached for the knob on the office door, intending to slam it on my way out.

Two seconds later, I was inside the room, my wrist caught in his unyielding grip, and the door shut behind me, with Jagger on the other side of it. I knew where this was going. I tried to yank free, but it was no use. He sat down on the edge of the twin bed that's pushed against the wall across from his desk and pulled me over his lap before I got halfway through a pleading "Quuuuuuint."

"I don't know what has gotten into you today," he said, over the sound of his palm colliding with my jean-covered rear end, "but you do not ever speak to me like that. Am I understood, Theodore William?"

You'd think he'd be at least a bit out of breath, with how hard and fast he was swatting, yet his voice was as even as ever. My "yes, sir," on the other hand, came out distinctly shaky. For good measure, I added, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it!"

I heard him sigh, and then he helped me to my feet and stood me in front of him. "I know you didn't, angel. Why did you say it, though? Have I made you feel—"

"No!" I wanted to crawl into his lap and sob now. "It wasn't anything you did. It was Mitch."

He gave me a puzzled frown. "What does Mitch have to do with this?"

"During practice today, we were arguing about touring again, and he said the reason I don't want to do it is because I don't care if the band makes money," I said. "Because I have a— a sugar daddy." My ears went red with shame, and my gaze dropped to my toes.

Quint sighed again, deeper. "Look at me, angel." I met his eyes through my lashes, and he said, "If Mitch actually thinks that, then he knows nothing about our relationship, and he doesn't deserve to be your friend."

"But we founded the band together," I said, tearfully. "We're the only two original members, and I think he might leave."

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said. Standing, he hugged me close and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Whatever happens, just remember that you are an extremely talented musician, Theodore William Calhoun. With or without Mitch.”

I didn’t go busking. Once I’d calmed down, I put a load of laundry in the washing machine without being asked again, and then I laid on the bed in the office with my songwriting notebook, and Quint and I worked together until dinnertime.

[Back to story](#)

The Gift

[The day of the dinner from Quint's point of view.]

I woke with the sun, at six-thirty. Theo's head was resting on my shoulder, his left leg and arm thrown over me possessively. With a deftness born from years of identical mornings, I slid out of his embrace and sat up on the edge of the bed. He sighed in his sleep and drew my pillow closer, burying his nose in it before he settled back down. Smiling, I tucked an especially unruly lock of auburn hair behind his ear.

Lying next to him again was an appealing idea, but already I heard the jingle of Jagger's collar from the living room and his toenails against the hardwood as he came to wait for me outside the bedroom door. I put on my glasses, got dressed in the jogging pants, t-shirt, and socks I had left on the armchair the night before, and then went out to greet him with a pat on the head. He bounded down the hallway and around the corner into the kitchen. When I caught up, I found him sitting beside the welcome mat, his short tail wagging back and forth across the tiles.

"All right, let's get your pack," I whispered.

Early on in our training process, we discovered that Jagger enjoys having a job to do. The pack is small and lightweight — just enough room to carry the essentials for a short run — but it gives him a sense of purpose that focuses him. Once I had buckled him into it, I put on my shoes and clipped the belt of his hands-free leash around my waist before snapping the other end to his collar.

"Ready?"

His entire rear end wiggled with excitement. I unlocked the door, and we headed out.

We took our weekday route: one mile down First Street, East Houston, and Baruch Drive to the East River Park entrance under the Williamsburg Bridge, then a half-mile north along the promenade, enjoying the breeze off the water, before we looped back.

The morning lobby attendant, Michael, was coming on duty when we returned. I wished him a good day and stepped into the elevator. As it carried us to the sixth floor, I checked my watch. Twenty-five minutes had passed since we left.

"Just over eight minutes a mile," I told Jagger, who looked up at me with his tongue lolling out. "That's not bad for a forty-nine-year-old, is it, boy?"

I entered the apartment quietly, so as not to wake Theo, but to my amazement, he was already up, still in rumpled pajamas and bedraggled hair, standing over a pan full of scrambled eggs.

“Are you feeling alright, angel?” I asked as I started taking off my shoes. “It’s seven in the morning on a Saturday, and you appear to be in a vertical position.”

“Ha ha,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I can’t surprise you with breakfast in bed because you even go running on your *birthday*, you freak of nature, so I was trying to have it done before you got back. Don’t you usually do the longer route over the bridge into Brooklyn on the weekends?”

I smiled. “Yes, but not on my birthday.”

“This is your version of taking the day off? Again I say: Freak.”

Jagger waited patiently for me to remove his pack after I’d unclipped the leash, and then went to his water bowl. With everything stowed away in the pantry ready for our next run, I joined Theo at the stove, dropping a light kiss on his mouth. “Thank you, angel. That’s very sweet of you.”

Grinning, he said, “I’m assuming you mean the breakfast, not calling you a freak.” Then he shrugged and added, “It’s nothing special, just eggs, toast, fruit, and coffee.”

“It looks delicious, and it’s special because you made it for me,” I said.

“At seven in the morning on a Saturday, remember.”

My lips twitched. “Exactly. I’m going to take a quick shower and shave before we eat, okay?”

“You don’t *have* to.” He stepped closer to me, looped an arm around my waist, and went up on his toes to nip along my jawline. “I kind of like the sweaty, stubbly look,” he murmured.

I made the involuntary noise he sometimes refers to as ‘growling’ and pulled him closer with my hands on his hips. “In that case, I’ll skip shaving, and after we eat, we can shower together, hmm?”

“Mmmm.” I felt his lips curl against my skin. “Good compromise.”

Our shower activities moved to the bed, where, eventually, I found myself in almost the same position I had woken up in, Theo again draped over me with the dead weight of sleep.

At least, I thought he was asleep, until I felt his hand slip, with a definite purpose, under the sheet that was pulled up around our waists.

“You cannot possibly be recovered already,” I said, without cracking my eyelids.

He chuckled softly. “Aw, did I wear you out, old man?”

I swatted him over the sheet, making more noise than sting, and he laughed again, a bright, sweet sound.

“Wow, I must’ve. That was not at all to your usual standard. The bite you gave me hurts more than that.”

“Does it?” Immediately concerned, I opened my eyes and shifted him so I could see his shoulder clearly. There were red impressions of my teeth in his skin. “I’m sorry, angel, I didn’t realize I used so much force.”

“Uh, did it seem like I was complaining?” he asked. “Because I really wasn’t.”

I brushed my thumb gently over the mark. “You’re going to have a bruise there.”

“How will I ever survive? You animal,” he deadpanned.

The skin appeared unbroken, so there was no risk of infection, and he seemed happy. That was a welcome change from this past week, no matter what had caused it.

On Monday, he and Mitch, one of his oldest friends, had an ugly fight during their practice session — even uglier than the one the week before, when Mitch had referred to me as Theo’s “sugar daddy.” It ended with Mitch quitting the band.

In the following days, the other two bandmates, Ethan and Kyle, told him they were thinking of moving on as well. I think that hit Theo the hardest. At least with Mitch, he’d seen it coming. They said they wanted to remain friends, but it stirred up all of his fears about failure and rejection.

Every second when he wasn’t trying to convince them to stay, he’d spent alternating between clinging to me and shoving at our boundaries, needing to reassure himself that I wasn’t going anywhere. I responded by tightening the reins. The stability of that support system comforts him just as much as a hug and a kind word. I doled out plenty of those, along with swats and a couple of spankings. While he grumbled that I was being too strict, I saw him calming down and regaining his confidence.

I thought we might have weathered the worst of it as we lay there in the sunlight. Or perhaps we were in the eye of the storm.

*

We spent a lazy morning and afternoon together in the apartment. My party wasn't until the next day, and I decided the preparations for it could wait, so I could enjoy the simple intimacy of just spending time with my angel. Near five o'clock, I was reading a book on the couch, my feet resting on the coffee table and Jagger lying underneath my outstretched legs. Theo's head was in my lap. He'd been scribbling in his music notebook, but he stopped and sat up, saying, "I'm going to go to Zeg's for a little while, okay?"

I frowned at him over the top of my book. "Why?"

He gave the one-shouldered, evasive shrug. "I just want to see her."

"You'll see her tomorrow, when she comes over for the party."

"Yeah, but tomorrow's not *today*," he said, like he was explaining the nuances of timekeeping to a very small child. When I raised an eyebrow at his tone, he sighed heavily. "Quint, I swear I'm not doing anything that will get me in trouble, but I need to go to Zeggy's for a bit and I need you to not ask questions. Please may I go? Sir?"

Ah. It must have been something to do with a birthday secret. "You may," I said, and he got up and walked towards the door. Turning my head, I called after him, "I want you back here in an hour and a half for dinner, alright?"

"Yes, sir," he said. Jagger started to follow him, and he gave the 'stay' signal. "No, boy, not this time."

I knew that meant he was going somewhere other than Zeggy's, though I didn't comment.

He returned well within my time limit. I was looking in the refrigerator to see what I might make for supper, and he sidled halfway through the door before he saw me standing there and stopped, clearly holding something behind his back. Jagger, who had come to greet him, stuck his nose around and sniffed at whatever it was.

"Um," Theo said.

"Oh, I think I may have forgotten something in the bedroom," I said. "Let me go get it."

"No, you don't have to— Quint!"

I turned back and tried to keep up the pretense even as he started laughing. "Yes, angel?"

“I was going to hide it and give it to you tomorrow, but *obviously* that’s not working, and I’m too impatient to wait,” he said. “Anyway, you ought to get at least one present on your actual birthday, so... here.”

He came in all the way and held out a wrapped gift. I thought it was a large, thin book, until I took it from him and realized the edges weren’t the right shape. “Thank you, angel.”

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “You haven’t even opened it yet.”

I brought it to the couch, with him and the dog trailing behind, and sat down. “You were keeping it at Zeggy’s?”

“Um... no, not exactly,” he said, his ears turning faintly pink as he sat next to me. “It’ll make sense after you open it, so would you hurry up?”

Jagger and he were both giving me identical, eager looks. I gave in and tore off the wrapping paper on one corner of the gift. It revealed the back of a picture frame, crafted in high-quality black walnut. Intrigued, I unwrapped the rest of it and flipped it over.

Inside the frame was a drawing. A portrait of Theo, playing his guitar in front of the Washington Arch, smiling the bright, warm smile I knew so well, and Jagger dancing at his side. Whoever the artist was, they’d somehow managed to put my angel’s energy and spirit into the lines on the paper: the joy he takes in performing and bringing happiness to his audience — whether it’s the kids at the hospital or onlookers on the street — and the love that shines in his eyes when he’s singing about me. I couldn’t speak for a moment.

“Quint? You okay?”

“Yes, I...” I stopped and swallowed. “I absolutely love it.”

“I knew you would,” he said, “but I didn’t expect you to *cry*.”

“I’m not crying,” I said, though I was very close. “This is wonderful, angel. Who drew it for you?” The only signature I saw was an overlapping S and C in one corner.

“I met an art student in the park a couple of weeks ago and commissioned it from him. His name’s Seb. I didn’t want to accidentally give anything away, so I didn’t mention him before.”

“Well, I’m glad you met him, because this is perfect.” I leaned over and kissed him a heartfelt ‘thank you.’ As I drew back, I said, “I only have two questions. Where did you go to pick it up, if not Zeggy’s?”

“The framing store,” he said. “They told me it’d be done after five today. *Then* I went to Zeg’s to wrap it. So, see, I wasn’t lying earlier.”

“A lie of omission is still a lie, young man,” I said, mock-sternly. “But since there were extenuating circumstances, I think we can let it slide this time.”

He grinned. “What was your other question?”

“Where are we going to hang it?”

After some debate, we decided to put it in my home office, where I could see it while I worked. I already have photos of him on my desk at the hospital, but none in the apartment. He helped me mark a spot on the wall and watched as I hammered in a nail to hold the drawing. Then we both sat on the edge of the guest bed to admire it in its new setting.

“The colors you picked for the frame and mat go well in here,” I said.

“I didn’t pick them, really, Seb did,” Theo replied. “He went to the shop with me and I described your tastes as best as I could, and that’s what he recommended.”

“I feel I should thank him. Not only for that, but for sharing his talent with us.”

Theo shifted next to me, and I took my gaze off the drawing to study him instead. “Is something wrong, angel?”

“No,” he said. “It’s just, I actually wanted to talk to you about Seb. He’s a great kid. A little shy, but Jagger brings him out of his shell — Jagger *loves* him, by the way — and he seems lonely. And, also...” He hesitated and then went on in a rush of words: “I kind of saw a text on his phone the first time I met him that made me suspect he might be in a discipline relationship, so I’ve been dropping hints, and I’m almost *positive* he’s a Brat. He said he’s got a fiancé, but since they’re long-distance, he’s essentially without a Top, and I was wondering if we could invite him here, because I’m sure if you met him, you’d see what I mean. Please?”

He gave me his best puppy-dog look. I ignored it while I blinked a few times and absorbed what he’d said. Theo occasionally posts on forums for couples who follow our lifestyle, I knew, though my natural penchant for privacy keeps me off of them most of the time. Neither of us wants to go out of our way to meet other Tops and Brats in real life. Now, if he was right, it had happened entirely by coincidence. I wondered what sorts of “hints” he’d been dropping.

However, I was more interested in the fact that he clearly thought of the artist as a friend, and he was in short supply of those recently. I felt, I confess, guilty that I wasn’t able to protect him better in the situation with Mitch. I needed to meet this Seb and asses him myself before the

budding friendship went any further. As much as I trust Theo's judgment, I had to make sure I'd done everything in my power to prevent him from getting hurt again.

"I would like to be introduced to him," I said, finally. "When do you think you could invite him over?"

He beamed. "How about for dinner tonight?"

"Tonight?" I asked. "As in, right now?"

"I know it's your birthday, and you probably want to spend it with just the two of us," he said, deflating a little and looking away. "Never mind."

It wasn't like him to give up so easily. It told me a lot about how he was feeling. Tilting my head to catch his eyes again, I said, "You're worried about him, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he said. The puppy face came back. "I just want you to confirm that he's a Brat, and see if we can help him somehow."

I shook my head gently. "Angel, it's not my place to go prying into his relationship."

"It isn't prying," he protested. "It's looking out for one of our own. If he *is* a Brat, he's got a pretty lousy Top. The guy just left him here and ran off to military school, from what I can gather. I want to make sure he's okay."

I sighed. There was probably more to the story than that. Theo sometimes needs another set of eyes looking on a situation to point out the small details he's missed. "You can invite him over tonight and I'll tell you what I think." Before he could get too excited, I added, "But neither one of us are going to ask intrusive questions. Understand?"

He nodded emphatically. "Yes, sir."

There turned out to be a loophole in that order. He began exploiting it shortly after I returned with the groceries to find Seb sitting at our kitchen counter.

The boy had feathery, dark hair falling over his forehead and a smattering of freckles spreading across his cheekbones from his slightly-upturned nose. When I praised the drawing, he blushed and fidgeted with the medical alert ID on his wrist, his green eyes meeting mine for only a moment at a time before flitting away again.

I could see the shyness, but as I watched his straight, serious mouth smile in response to Theo's light-hearted manner, I thought Jagger wasn't the only one who brought him out of it.

Then Theo joked about me making him cry, and Seb's eyes widened as he glanced between us, unsure of how to react. He wasn't the only one. I thought it was unintentional at first, until Theo put on his 'Who, me?' look and shifted his weight just enough to subtly draw my attention to the glass of soda on the counter.

He was Bratting at me, I realized. Not in the mostly-subconscious way he'd been doing for the last week; no, this was quite deliberate. My suspicions were confirmed when he gave me a bit of backtalk that he knew very well would've gotten him a swat or a mouth full of soap had we been alone.

In lieu of sending him to the corner, I ordered him out of the kitchen, to the stool next to Seb. One glance at the younger man and I could see Theo was right about him being a Brat. He was responding to me better than my own, who smiled triumphantly as he went around the peninsula.

I hoped, now that his point was proven, he would behave and I wouldn't need to excuse us for a quiet discussion about manipulating one's Top.

Unfortunately, he took the first opportunity to turn the conversation to Seb's relationship. After getting the boy to share that his fiancé was attending the Naval Academy, he pressed on with, "So you're here in the city all by yourself?"

Seb nodded, and Theo threw me a significant look. I ignored him. If Zain was a Top, I was sure he knew what his Brat could handle better than either of us. As I finished the prep work for our dinner, I smoothly changed the subject whenever I saw my husband trying to steer it that way again. He eventually gave up and went back to his first tactic. I had little choice but to play right into that one, and he knew it.

After telling him to wash his hands in response to his latest bit of Bratting, I went to put the wok on the stove. When I turned back, Seb was scanning all of the chopped-up ingredients in front of him, tapping his thumb and fingers together intently. It made me wonder what was written on the side of the medical alert tag hidden against his skin. I could think of a number of conditions that might lead to being careful about food, even if he didn't have any allergies.

"Is something wrong, Seb?" I asked.

He blinked at me and stuttered, "Yes— I mean, no, everything's fine. Um... where's your...?"

I pointed him towards the bathroom and watched him take his bag with him as he disappeared around the corner. The moment I heard the door shut behind him, I turned to Theo, who was still washing up at the sink.

“Pardon me, I didn’t realize we had invited him over for dinner *and* a show.”

That quiet, polite tone of voice is very effective at getting his attention. He stopped dead in the middle of drying his hands off with a towel and suddenly looked much more cautious.

“Okay, I know I shouldn’t have pushed you like that,” he said, “but you *saw* how he reacted when you pulled the Top act.”

I crossed my arms. “Theodore William, I do not appreciate being treated as though I’m trained to perform for an audience on your command, like Jagger.”

His gaze went to the floor, and his ears turned bright red with shame. “I didn’t think of it that way, honestly. I’m sorry.”

“And when you started asking him about his fiancé after I told you we weren’t going to be intrusive?” I asked. “Look at me while you answer, please.”

He shifted his feet and bit his lip before he managed to meet my eyes straight-on and say, “...I was only trying to get to know him.”

It might have started out as that, but I knew him too well to think he’d have resisted more personal questions. Sighing, I said, “What goes on between him and Zain is none of our business, young man.”

“But I’m right, and he’s on his own here!” he insisted.

Underneath his voice, I thought I heard a faint noise from the hallway heralding Seb’s return. “We will finish discussing this later.”

Theo knows that implies, more often than not, he’ll be going over my knee. He looked completely dejected. I stepped forward, pulled him into a hug, and kissed the top of his head.

“I do mean ‘discuss,’” I said, very quietly. “I haven’t made up my mind on anything else yet, alright?” He nodded against my shoulder. I let him go and went back to the stove while he started taking dishes out of the cupboard.

*

For the rest of the dinner, he was on his best behavior. When Seb took a phone call from his fiancé into the living room, and I asked, “Angel, would you get us each a fortune cookie from the box in the pantry, please?”, he gave me a look that said he knew I was putting him out of earshot to prevent any nosiness, but obeyed without question.

I couldn’t help overhearing Seb’s side of the conversation myself, though I tried not to listen too closely. Just a few seconds into it, he said “I’m so sorry,” in perfectly-pronounced French. I glanced over at him, surprised. There was no hint of an accent in his English, either. Perhaps he had bilingual parents?

Now that I was paying attention, I noticed how easy it was to see he loved the man on the other end of the call. It was in his voice and the way he almost cradled the phone against his cheek, like it held something very precious to him. He lost every trace of the shyness, his entire body more relaxed than it had been since he’d arrived.

Then he ended the call and came back to the table apologizing and already looking closed up again.

“It’s not a problem at all,” I said, while Theo returned from the kitchen.

“Fortune cookie?”

“Oh, no, thanks,” Seb said. His hand brushed over the alert bracelet on his opposite wrist. I took a cookie for myself and unwrapped it while I considered that.

Theo pulled me aside as we cleared the dishes and said, “So, you see the loneliness too, right? I was thinking, what if we invite him to the party tomorrow?”

I looked from him to Seb, who was sitting on the couch petting Jagger. Yes, I could see what he meant. I wanted to help the boy if I could. “As long as we don’t have a repeat of your behavior tonight.”

“I swear I’ll be good,” he said.

“Then you may invite him.”

He grinned and called across the room, “Hey, Seb, wanna come to Quint’s party tomorrow? It’s going to be some of his colleagues, plus our friends Zeggy and Ike and their kids. And Jagger, of course.”

“Oh,” Seb said. “Uh, thank you very much for inviting me. I appreciate it. But, um, I have a lot of homework to do this weekend, so—”

“No problem,” said Theo, still smiling, though not quite as broadly. “I remember how that is. We can make other plans, yeah?”

Seb smiled back. “I’d like that,” he said. “I should probably get going.”

“You sure?” Theo asked. “You can stay as long as you want.”

He glanced sideways at me as he said it, and I knew that while he meant it sincerely, part of his motivation was delaying our discussion. Unluckily for him, Seb shook his head. He was already standing up and putting his messenger bag over his shoulder.

“Thanks, and I really enjoyed the dinner, but I have to get back.”

“I want to thank you for the drawing again,” I said, going to the pantry to take out his shoes for him. “It made my birthday.”

“Oh, yeah, happy birthday,” he said as he came to get them. “Sorry, I don’t think I said it before.”

“That’s alright, and thank you,” I replied. “Angel, I can finish cleaning up if you want to walk Seb downstairs. Seb, will you be okay to get back to your dorm from there, or should Theo show you the way?”

“I’ll be fine,” he said. “It’s only a few blocks north.”

“Eight blocks,” Theo confirmed. “You just stick to the east side of Bowery up to where it turns into Third Ave.”

Darkness had fallen. I almost wanted to insist on Theo going with him, and had to remind myself he wasn’t my Brat. I could see why Theo already felt protective of him. The few times I got a direct look into his eyes longer than half a second, I saw a sensitive, gentle soul hiding in there.

Theo took him downstairs and returned while I was putting silverware into the dishwasher. He came up behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist, and rested his forehead on my shoulder blade. Reaching around, I collected him by his belt loop and pulled him to my side, under my arm. I’ve learned it’s the easiest position to maneuver in when he wants constant, full-body contact.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice soft and half-muffled by my shirt.

“Shhh,” I soothed. “We’ll talk about it in a minute.”

I put the kitchen in order one-handed, my other rubbing over his back, and then took him into the living room, where I sat on the couch and he leaned heavily against me, curling his legs up behind him.

“I really am sorry,” he repeated and he looked up at me through his lashes. “I didn’t mean be... a brat, and force you into doing something.”

I had to smile. “Angel, you’ve been doing nearly the same thing since Monday. If you show me those signals, consciously or not, I am going to respond because you need it, not because you’re forcing me. It was the deliberateness with which you did it today, just to provoke a reaction out of Seb, that I didn’t like. Understand?”

“Yea– Yes, sir,” he answered, and it said a lot that he didn’t argue with me about the past week. “I just wanted you to see Seb’s reaction, and for him to maybe see that he’s got people who get it, y’know?”

“Yes, well, I think you certainly accomplished that,” I said, dryly. “From now on, it’s up to Seb if he wants to broach the subject, but if you behave like that in front of him again, I will have no qualms about excusing us to another room for a few minutes, the same as I would if you did it in front of Zeggy. Is that clear?”

His ears went pink, probably as he remembered the last time I’d disciplined him at Zeggy and Ike’s townhouse. “Yes, sir.”

“It’s also up to him whether he wants to talk about his fiancé at all. He’s an adult, fully capable of managing his own relationship, and he doesn’t need the third degree from you. Got it?”

Whereas before, he had agreed without hesitation, on that one, he got a stubborn set to his chin and kept his mouth firmly closed. Arching my eyebrow, I swatted him low down on his right buttock.

“Ow! Okay! I mean, yes, sir.”

“Thank you. Now, that’s done, and you’re forgiven. I have one last request.”

He frowned at me suspiciously. “What?”

“You haven’t sang me ‘Happy Birthday’ yet,” I said, smiling. He laughed and went to get one of his guitars.

*

An hour before bed, I collected our mobile devices and put them on their charging stations in the office. Then I stood and studied the drawing on the wall for awhile.

Birthdays are a time for taking stock of your life and celebrating your blessings. I have a healthy body and a fulfilling, worthwhile career that provides a comfortable living. I have close friends, an honorary niece and nephew, and a wonderful dog.

Most of all, I have my angel, who will always be the greatest gift I have ever been given.

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Pillow Talk

“Quiiiiiinnnt.”

I looked in the direction of the sleepy whine, down towards my chest. The dim light escaping through the curtains from the street allowed me to just make out the hint of red tinting Theo’s hair. He lifted his head off my shoulder and narrowed his eyes at me.

“I’m sorry, angel. Was I moving?”

“No, your breathing’s all wrong, and you keep sighing,” he said. “What’re you thinking about?”

Carding my fingers through his hair, I sighed once more. “I’m wondering if I handled Seb as well as I could have earlier today.”

He shifted to meet my gaze straight-on with a frown. “He’s okay, though, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he’s alright,” I said. I knew Seb wasn’t going to be completely relaxed until after Zain’s disciplinary hearing, but he’d been laughing at Theo’s and Jagger’s antics just before he left, and he’d looked much better overall since Zain came to see him. From what I could tell, he would be fine.

“So what’s the problem?” Theo asked, crossing his arms over my collarbone and resting his chin on them.

I pushed his bangs back as I considered how much to tell him. It was Seb’s prerogative, not mine, to share anything about our arrangement beyond the most basic facts. I had already made that very clear to my inquisitive Brat, and I intended to go on reminding him of it as needed. However, if a similar issue had been keeping him from sleeping, I would insist he talk about it with me.

“I may have been a bit harsh with him,” I said, finally.

Theo gave me a disbelieving expression. “*You?* Harsh?”

“Harsh for Seb,” I explained, “not harsh for you.”

“What’d you do?” he asked, frowning again.

“Well, I—” I stopped. What *had* I done? Called him by his full first name and told him not to lie to me. That was all, really. My guilt seemed entirely out of proportion, when I compared it to lectures I’ve given Theo. Unless I also weighed their reactions against each other. My husband

is capable of pulling on my heartstrings like no one else, but a reprimand as gentle as that would likely have elicited nothing more than downcast eyes and a quiet apology.

Seb, on the other hand, looked as though he wanted to bolt from the room. I had found myself moving to the bed and hugging him against my side without asking if that was okay or even thinking about it. Luckily, he accepted my embrace, yet I still couldn't help feeling like I'd stepped on a kitten's tail. I tried to reassure him, offering to call Zain with the idea that his own Top was better equipped to comfort him, and that was what led to the disclosure I'd been seeking. Perhaps the small push was what he needed, in order to feel safe with me.

"Oh my god, what was so bad you can't tell me? You broke out the thumbscrews, didn't you? I *knew* you have some," Theo interrupted my thoughts. Behind the humor in his voice, there was ill-disguised worry. He'd bonded with the other Brat quickly, and I suspected he was almost viewing him as a younger brother now.

"No, angel. You saw him afterward. Did he look like he'd been tortured?"

He shook his head.

"We're getting used to each other," I said. "We both need to find the best way that works for us. It took you and I some adjusting, too, in the beginning, remember?"

"You were way too easy on me in the beginning," he said. "Now you've got the opposite problem? That's weird."

"I think it has to do with the kind of Topping that Seb is accustomed to, as well," I told him. "I'm going to ask Zain for some pointers."

"Sounds good," he said, and then yawned hugely. "Can you sleep now?"

I smiled. "Yes, I think I can."

"Great, because if I'm grumpy tomorrow, it is totally your fault, so no naps allowed," he said, readjusting himself into his favorite cuddling position, with one arm and leg over me and his head on the juncture between my shoulder and bicep.

"If I send you to take a nap, I'll take one too," I promised him. He huffed softly. Closing my eyes, I brought my other arm across my chest to stroke his scalp in lulling circles.

"You're the best pillow," he murmured, and that was the last either of us spoke until morning.

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Pillow Talk 2

Leaving Seb in the guest room, I walked back to the kitchen and disposed of the partially-eaten banana. Then I headed toward my own bed with a small sigh. I had nearly given him a kiss on the forehead when I tucked him in, and only pulled back at the last moment because I didn't want to make him uncomfortable. Zain said he reacted well to touch, and I had witnessed as much with my own eyes, but I kept having to remind myself that the boy barely knew me.

Not your Brat, I thought, even if you are being a stand-in Top for him.

Something about that niggled at me... As I puzzled over it, I entered the master bedroom and found Theo sitting up against the headboard. I raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, I know, I know," he said, with a low voice and a dismissive attitude I didn't particularly care for. "I should be trying to sleep. But is Seb okay?"

Firmly, I said, "He is fine. Lie down, please."

He slouched perhaps three inches and said, "You're sure? I didn't even— I would've let him just keep eating bananas if you hadn't come in."

I shook my head, smiling slightly as I crossed the room and sat down on my side of the bed. I couldn't very well fault him for being kept up by the same tug of concern Seb brought out of me. "I'm sure," I said. "He didn't eat enough to do any harm, angel, and it wasn't your fault. You aren't used to thinking in terms of sugar levels and carb counts. That takes training."

Gazing down at his lap, he said, "You were right, though. I should've gotten you up when I woke up."

"Yes," I agreed, straightforward. "That's one of our rules regardless of Seb, isn't it?"

He nodded, still not meeting my eyes. I studied him a moment. I hadn't planned to do anything beyond the small reminder I'd given him in the kitchen, but he seemed uneasy about it.

"I think you'll write some lines to help you remember and apply that rule," I said. "I'll assign them in the morning."

He gave me a half-hearted look of protest, which I ignored. Had I asked if he thought he needed a punishment to move past it, he would have vehemently denied the fact. It's much simpler and kinder to him to take away the decision.

Laying down, I reached for his hand under the comforter and pulled. "Come here."

He moved against my side, resting his head in its customary spot on my left shoulder. I should have encouraged him to sleep then, yet I had to check in with him. Neither of us were used to my attention being divided between two Brats. If any adjustments were needed, better to know now.

“How are you feeling about all of this?” I asked.

“You mean other than wanting to go track Seb’s roommates down and explain to them how not-cool it is to leave edibles lying around unlabeled?”

His dark tone reminded me of Zain, when we were talking on Skype after Seb dropped off, saying, “I would love to get my hands on those idiots. There’s being rude and inconsiderate, and then there’s stupidity so severe it makes me honestly wonder how you get admitted to Cooper Union without *brains* in your head.”

From where I had sat, looking down at Seb’s long eyelashes and freckles, and the way his features rumbled in distress even as he slept, it was easy to understand Zain’s anger, though I suspected part of it was also frustration at not being able to comfort his Brat in person. “Did you report them?” I’d asked, and he shook his head.

“Seb would have a conniption. *Something* has to change drastically, but I didn’t want to upset him any more tonight, especially since he’s already got the Maggie Carpenter Effect going full-blast.”

“The Maggie Carpenter Effect?”

“Oh, that’s the thing I told you about that lights up all your Topy, caring instincts like a Christmas tree,” he explained, smiling a little. “Ever seen the movie *Runaway Bride*?”

“I’m afraid not,” I said.

“Well, Maggie Carpenter is the main character, played by Julia Roberts, and at one point her best friend describes her as subconsciously saying, ‘I’m charming and mysterious in a way that even I don’t understand, and something about me is crying out for protection from a big man like you.’ It’s always reminded me of Seb. Who, by the way, would be *mortified* by that description. He is still asleep, right?”

I checked and nodded. From the way his eyes were moving behind their lids, he was probably in a REM cycle, dreaming.

“He’s really got no idea he’s doing it,” Zain had gone on. “It’s *very* strong right now, though, and I’m having a hard enough time.”

So was I, and I wasn't even in love with Seb. And so was Theo, apparently. As I pulled myself back to the present, he was saying, "I mean, he seems okay, *now*, and he was pretty damn adorable in the kitchen. Earlier was awful, though."

"I know, angel," I said, rubbing his back. "Zain will handle the roommates, I'm sure."

Skeptically, he said, "I guess," and before I could question him on that, he added, "*You* were pretty cute, too, you know, calling him your kitten. How do you say it again?"

"*Mon chaton*," I said. "That doesn't bother you, my having an endearment for him like that?"

"No, why would it?" he asked, sounding confused. "It's not like you're calling him 'angel.' It's what your *nanny* called you, and you're kind of... not really, but you're *kinda* his nanny, in a way. That sounds weird. You know what I mean."

I did, and it gave me a startling realization of what had pestered me earlier. I'd reprimanded myself for thinking of Seb as my Brat, when that wasn't what I'd been doing at all. He was not 'my' Brat, not as Theo was — I had no desire to be in a relationship with him in that way. No, I discovered, with a bit of embarrassment, I was thinking of him as a surrogate son.

Despite devoting my career to keeping children healthy, and my love for my niece and nephew, I've never had any true desire for kids of my own, nor has Theo. I still didn't. And yet I felt very definitely parental towards Seb, in addition to being his friend. It was an odd emotion, and one I wanted to contemplate more before sharing.

"Well, I'm glad you don't mind," I said. "You know I would stop, if you did?"

"I know," said Theo. "But it's good. I think he needs that. He must feel so alone here."

I pulled him closer as I tried again to imagine doing what Seb and Zain were doing, separating themselves for such a long period. It made my heart ache for both of them. "He isn't alone now," I said. "He has us, and knowing that helps Zain, too." At least, I hoped it did.

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Power and Enchantment

[Theo's point of view, starting right after Seb reports the stolen insulin. For the curious: the medicinal uses of [lavender](#) and [skullcap](#), and [Cunningham's Encyclopedia of Magical Herbs](#).]

Quint really was adorable with Seb. He's always gentle, and taking care of people is one of his specialties, of course, and it wasn't that much different than how he'd treat me in a similar situation, but it's easier to appreciate the cuteness of something like that when you can take a step back to observe it rather than experiencing it directly. When I volunteer at the hospital, I love watching him with his patients for exactly the same reason.

So no, I didn't mind him calling Seb his 'kitten' at all. I'd hoped he'd keep watch over the other Brat almost since we met, to make up for Seb's own absentee Top. And Seb was bonding with Quint, too. Why else would he come back to us after what happened with his roommates and the insulin? Still, it surprised me.

Wednesday night, I was just starting to think about what to make for dinner when our intercom buzzed. I answered it, and Rick, one of the front desk guys, said, "Mr. Calhoun, are you expecting company? That kid who left this morning has been pacing on the sidewalk for about ten minutes now. Should I let him in?"

"Uhhhh. Hang on, I'll be down in a minute," I said. Better to have someone Seb knew come to meet him, with his shyness. Especially if something was wrong. "Just keep an eye on him, okay, Rick?"

"Sure thing," he said.

"Quint?" I called, already opening the pantry door for my shoes. "Rick says Seb's outside."

He came around the corner from the office and frowned at me. "Did he ask to come in?"

Shaking my head as I slid my feet into my Converse, I said, "He's just been pacing. For ten minutes."

At that, Quint grabbed a pair of shoes, too — his sneakers, which I have never, *ever* seen him wear when he wasn't about to go on a run — and pulled them on.

He didn't even tie them prior to opening our door and heading for the elevator. I barely had time to tell Jagger to stay before I dashed after him.

“What do you think it is?” I asked as we rode down.

Quint was crouched, doing up his laces at super-speed, and didn’t answer me for a moment. Then he straightened and shook his head. “I’m not sure, angel, but I intend to find out.”

He’d succeed, too. He had that determined, dog-with-a-bone look in his eye. Maybe I should’ve warned Seb about that when he’d asked what kind of a Top Quint was.

We saw Seb before he saw us, even though he was looking through the window to the lobby. I could tell because he went about five shades paler when he *did* spot us, and then he turned and hoofed it down the street like he was being chased by a pack of hellhounds.

Quint took off after him. I tried to keep up, but look, I have significantly shorter legs and I’m not a runner, okay? By the time I got outside, Quint was halfway down the block and Seb was at the corner of Bowery and First. I watched Quint cover the last few yards to him in seconds, position himself in front of the younger man, and start doing his impression of a brick wall. I couldn’t hear what he said. As I came up, though, Seb was answering, “Nothing. This was a dumb idea. I’ll just go back to my dorm.”

“No, you will not,” Quint said. “Take a deep breath, please.”

Seb inhaled. It wasn’t very deep.

He had a duffle in one hand and his messenger bag slung across his back, and both of them looked full to bursting. No wonder he seemed weighed-down. “Here, let me,” I said, reaching for the strap of the messenger bag.

Clutching it closer, he looked over his shoulder and said, “I can handle it.”

Oh, not a good move, I thought, as Quint’s eyebrows went up.

“Seb, let Theo take the bag, please.”

For a second, I thought he was going to keep arguing. Then he lifted the strap over his head and handed it to me, and I nearly dropped it. “Jeez, what the hell do you have in here? Bricks?”

“Textbooks,” he said, quietly. “Plus sketchbooks, and most of the art supplies I need for my classes.”

Quint pointed to the duffle bag. “What does that have in it?”

Seb did this thing where it seemed like he was squirming, but he wasn’t? It looked odd, as if he’d suppressed a sneeze or something. And yet, he readily answered, “Clothes and medical stuff.”

I was absorbing the implications of that when Quint, always a step ahead of me, asked, “Do you need a place to stay, *mon chaton*?”

All at once, Seb exhaled, like he’d just been waiting for those words, and said, “If... if it’s not too much trouble.”

So we took him inside — me carrying the messenger bag on his left, Quint with the duffel on his right — and upstairs, where Quint sat him down on the couch and got the full story out of him with a few questions. I watched from the armchair. Seb answered willingly, though he sounded exhausted. He only protested when Quint suggested texting Zain.

“He’ll be busy right now,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t want to bother him when he can’t respond.”

Honestly, was there ever a time when the guy *wasn’t* too busy to be bothered?

“We both know he said you can text him at any time, Seb,” Quint replied, patiently. “I’d like you to at least make him aware that there’s something you need to talk about. Or I can do it, if you’d prefer.”

Seb bit his lip a moment and then took his phone out, saying, “No, I can. I’ll ask him if he can try to get out of dinner early, so we have more time to Skype.”

“Thank you,” said Quint.

After he was done, he looked from Quint to me and asked, “You’re sure you don’t mind me staying? I can go back and figure something else out, so don’t feel obligated or anything.”

“I’m happy you’re staying,” I said. “Look, so is Jagger!” He was laying with his head on Seb’s foot, fast asleep. Seb glanced down at him, and the corners of his lips turned up just slightly.

“I’m glad as well,” Quint added. “I’m also sure Zain would agree with me that you are not returning to the dorm while Mark is there. I don’t like the sound of him. If you left anything you need, I’ll go with you to pick it up, understood?”

Seb nodded and said, “*Oui, monsieur*,” which was still a little odd to hear where I’d expect a plain old ‘yes, sir,’ but Quint took it in stride.

“Thank you,” he said again. “Angel, what were you planning to make for dinner, now that we have a vegetarian dining with us?”

“You don’t need to do anything special,” Seb said, and I rolled my eyes.

“Would you stop acting like you’re imposing on us?” I asked. “You’re making me think I’m giving off unwelcoming vibes somehow.” To Quint, I said, “I hadn’t figured out what to make yet. Hey, I know! Seb and I can go to the store and pick something out together. What d’ya say, Seb?”

“Um, okay.”

“No junk,” Quint told me as we all stood, and I conferred an eye roll on him this time.

“It’s Whole Foods. They don’t sell junk.” Well, not what *I’d* consider proper junk, anyway, though Quint disagrees.

One of his brows twitched up, but all he said was, “Be back in half an hour so we aren’t eating too late, please.”

“Will do,” I said, and gave him a kiss before Seb and I headed out.

It took a bit longer than that, mainly because whenever I asked Seb what he wanted, he’d say something along the lines of, “Oh, I’m fine with anything you’d like.”

Finally, I said, kind of snarky, “Okay, how about lobster?” and he looked so horrified, I immediately wanted to bite my tongue off. “Sorry,” I said. “That was... I’m really sorry. Just. I’m asking what *you* would like?”

“Right,” he said, a bit sheepishly. “Um. Spaghetti? If you make the sauce separately, there can be a vegetarian and a non-vegetarian version.”

“Spaghetti! We can do spaghetti,” I said, nodding and turning the cart around to head for the pasta aisle. “I’m afraid we’ll need a salad or something too, though, or Quint will start talking about the Importance of Vegetables in a Balanced Diet.”

“I like salad.”

I stopped so quickly he almost bumped into me. “You... like... salad?”

“...Yes?”

“Piles of leaves with vinegar on them?”

He laughed. “It’s not only leaves and vinegar.”

“Oh, I know, if you’re really unlucky, you get *broccoli*, too,” I said.

Grinning, he said, “I love broccoli.”

“Okay, that’s it, give me your Brat card,” I said, holding my hand out. “I’m revoking your privileges.”

He looked at my palm for a second, and then said, “Know what’s really good? Broccoli on pizza.”

Now he was messing with me. “*What?* NO. Vegetables do *not* belong anywhere *near* a pizza crust.”

Giggling again, he said, “You sound like Zain.”

Which is just weird, if you ask me.

Anyway, we bought the food, went back, and I made dinner, with Seb offering to help about every two seconds, until I gave up on telling him he was a guest and put him in charge of the salad, since he had such a weird love of it. And I have to admit, it turned out okay. For, y’know, *salad*.

After dinner, he went into the guest room to Skype with Zain for a while, and then came to get Quint, saying the other Top wanted to talk to him. Quint returned alone a few minutes later and told me Seb had decided to go to bed early. Privately, I suspected Quint, or maybe Zain, had decided that for him, but asking if I was right would only get me accused of nosiness.

I played on my synthesizer with my headphones plugged in, while Quint read, until it was time for us to sleep. When I woke up the next morning, he’d already left for the hospital. I went to see if Seb was awake, and found him doing yoga in the space between the guest bed and the desk.

I know very little about yoga, so I can’t tell you the name of the pose or anything, but he was standing on one leg, with the other bent so the sole of his foot rested against his inner thigh, and his hands were pressed palm-to-palm in front of his chest. I’m sure if I’d tried to do it for longer than a few seconds, I’d fall over. Seb looked like a strong wind couldn’t have swayed him.

It was odd, because he’d always given me an almost-subconscious impression of being gangly and uncomfortable in his own body. Now he seemed full of grace, as if he were built for this.

He was staring at the wall over the bed with no sign of having noticed I was there. I felt like maybe I shouldn’t interrupt him, so I went to make myself a bowl of cereal without saying

anything. Later, when he joined me and brought up the subject of special herbs for a bath, I wasn't quite as surprised as I might've been. I mean, not that everyone who practices yoga also does pagan rituals or whatever, but it just fit Seb, I guess.

We agreed to meet at my performance spot in Washington Square after his classes, so we could go find the stuff he needed. Zeggy had given me the names of two occult places she knew from her brief foray into Wicca when we were teenagers, and I figured the one called Flower Power was our best bet. We headed there first.

I remember talking with Zeg about what it all entailed back in high school, and honestly, it didn't seem that much different from any other religion. Still, I wasn't sure what to expect at the shop. I told Jagger to sit just outside the door before slowly following Seb in.

The place was small, with worn wooden floorboards and kind of dim lighting. Large glass jars lined shelves that ran all along the right wall, every one of them full of some kind of plant and labeled with the contents. The left wall had shelves, too, with a mix of books, essential oils, and weirder things: little figurines, giant seashells, and couple baskets of what looked like kindling for a campfire. Two woman stood behind the counter in the back, both of them perfectly normal, especially by East Village standards. They stopped chatting with each other just long enough to say "Hello!" to us, and then went back to discussing a movie they'd watched.

Seb was studying the wall of jars with a slight frown. "See what you need?" I asked him.

"Well, there's lavender," he said, pointing to one jar. "I don't see lemon leaves, though."

The women overheard us. One of them said, "I'm afraid we're fresh out of lemon. Can I ask what effect you're going for? Maybe I can recommend an alternative."

Seb got the borderline-deer-in-the-headlights expression I was starting to suspect was his reaction to anyone he doesn't know suddenly talking to him, but he said, "Peace and purification?"

"Ah, I thought so," the woman said, whatever that meant. She came out from behind the counter and walked over to tap another jar farther down the wall. "Skullcap is excellent for peace, and then you could use the lavender for the purification side. They make a nice balance, too, since skullcap's feminine and lavender's masculine. Or if you want to focus the lavender on the peace, you could use rosemary for purification, if you don't mind the thing about those two together also preserving chastity."

"Um, the skullcap is fine," Seb said, blushing pink. "The prices are by the ounce?"

"Yep."

“I’ll have three of each, please.”

I went to look at some of the stranger book titles while she got the herbs ready and the other woman rung him up. As we left, I asked, “Need anything else?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Epsom salt, cheesecloth, and candles.”

“Do they have to be, uh, ‘special’ candles?” I asked, making air-quotes around the word.

“No, just white, unscented candles.”

“Okay, we’ve got cheesecloth at home, and Duane Reade would have candles and epsom salt. There’s gotta be one around here somewhere.” I turned down the street with him and Jagger both following me.

He said, “I can buy my own cheesecloth,” and I had to laugh.

“It’s, like, three bucks for a yard, at most, so unless you’re making a dress with it, you can use some of ours.”

Of course, I wasn’t thinking about how I don’t cook things that require cheesecloth, and I had no idea where it would be. After poking around the pantry for a few minutes, I suggested waiting for Quint to get home so I could ask him. Seb said he didn’t mind. I was kind of nervous, though, how my practical, scientific husband might react to this whole thing. Not that he’d ever be rude about it or get angry or anything, but I was expecting a bit more than, “Alright, I’ll show you how the bath works after we finish eating.”

And he did just that.

I frowned as I watched them bent over the tub. When they were done, Seb went to Skype with Zain and Quint said, “Angel, is the table cleared?”

“Getting to it.”

He followed me and helped transfer the dishes to the kitchen counter. It was my turn to clean, since Quint had cooked, so once they were all there, he went to sit on the sofa.

As I started rinsing, I said, “I would’ve thought you’d be more... skeptical about the—” I jerked my head towards the bathroom. “That.”

Quint leaned back a little, checking, I think, that the office door was closed, and then said, “It’s not so farfetched, angel. The sedative effect of smelling lavender is fairly well-supported,

scientifically, and I also found a couple of smaller studies suggesting American skullcap could have anxiolytic properties, though more research is needed.”

I grinned. Of *course* he'd gone and found studies in the two hours since Seb first told him about the herbs. “So you're saying the... ritual, or whatever you'd call what he's doing, really works?”

He pushed his glasses up his nose, which is an almost-sure sign he's about to deliver a treatise. I wasn't disappointed.

“I'm saying that a large percentage of medicines are derived from plants themselves or from synthesized chemicals that were originally discovered in plants, so the idea of certain herbs aiding in healing both mental and physical ailments is not without merit, though of course the efficacy of each method varies widely.

“There are also an increasing number of studies showing a significant positive correlation between spiritual practices and good health, and placebo responses are quite real, as well. The mind is very powerful. If a person strongly expects a certain effect to happen, it can induce true, physical changes in body chemistry.” He picked up his current book from the end table, opened it, and rested one foot on the opposite knee. Smiling a little, he added, “In any case, a hot bath by candlelight certainly isn't going to harm him.”

That all made sense, but it didn't mean I couldn't tease Quint a little. “Yeah, whatever. I'm pretty sure it's got more to do with you having a soft spot for *'mon chaton'* than all that,” I said, smirking. “You should be careful, or he'll have you wrapped around his little finger before long.”

He ignored me, the way he often does when he knows I'm right and doesn't want to admit it.

As I finished cleaning, I whistled “Do You Believe In Magic?” He ignored that, too.

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