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Can a student write a novel in a month?

Julia Tanner

Western Michigan University, hulia555@gmail.com

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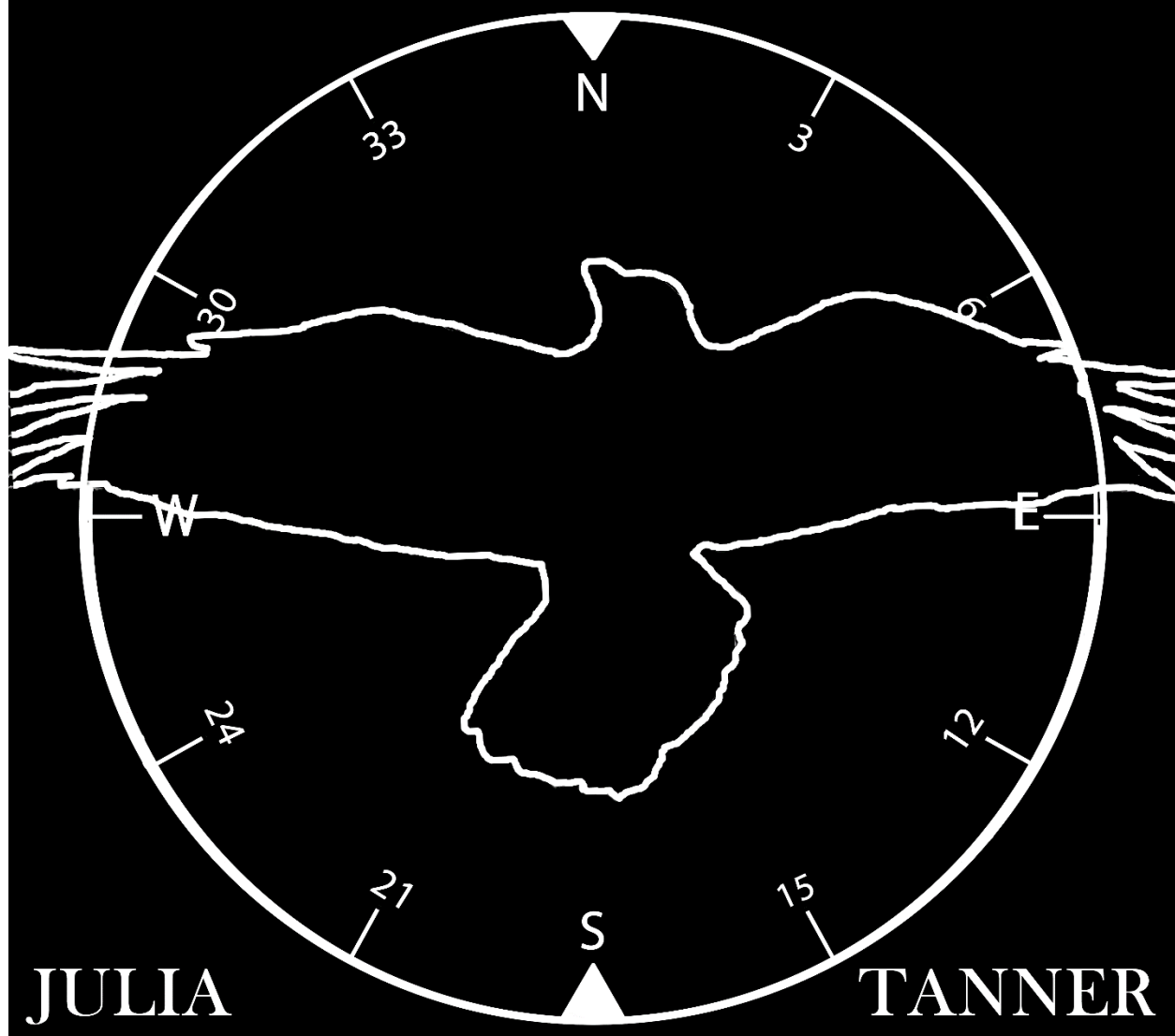
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WHISKEY HOTEL



Chapter one

Familiar love that never ceases, is the oldest memory of them all, it can cure any ailment and pain, even the two types of pain lead to the aging of the human soul. The first type of pain is recognized in a flinch from a simple hug or smile. The second is in the hands that are only grasped behind closed doors and hidden away from the public sphere. Drew experienced the first pain when Faye jumped in her seat as his hand clasped at her knee. Drew's Whiskey Sour wobbled in his hand as he fumbled for his iPhone.

"Okay what's your number again?" Drew asked

"555-674-2110 you can text me anytime." Faye responded

"How about I call you instead?"

"That is your generation not mine." Faye laughed.

"Harsh how old do you think I am?"

"I mean the way you look doesn't always translate."

"Come on honey give me a guess."

"It's Faye, not honey. I'm not one for pet names. But okay, thirty-two?"

"Can I lie and say yes?"

"Only if I can lie and claim I'm twenty-six."

When Faye woke up in the morning, twisted in her blue dress, she realized her true age might bother Drew. Yet, as Faye rolled over to look at Drew, she didn't see the same mature aura she tended to relate to older men. Instead, Drew seemed more comparable to the graduate students she knew. Drew had a few lines around his eyes and deep laugh lines, but Faye just saw a happy care free life in those wrinkles.

Faye was reading this man as free and she didn't actually know him or his life. They had too many drinks at the bar and some sloppy finger play. Which had led to his apartment which had led to this, Faye

waking up wondering if she should dress and bail. He had her number after all, he would text if he wanted to see her again. Plus Faye wasn't even sure she wanted to see him again, what would her friends say about her spending the night with a much older man? With that in mind Faye tumbled out of bed and into her sandals, she managed to slide her way to the front door before she heard a cough behind her.

"Making a break for it already?" Drew was standing in the doorway of the bedroom in a fresh pair of boxers and a faded AC/DC t-shirt.

"Well I'm sure you can remember what the one-night-stand etiquette is, or has your Alzheimer's already progressed too far?"

"Aren't you feisty in the morning? Need some caffeine before you go? The coffee started about a half hour ago, the timer function is useful for hangovers."

Faye stood grasping the door handle not sure how to take his blasé attitude. Did he feel bad for her? Awkward because she didn't leave before he got up? Didn't want this thing to end yet? Drew had made his way into the kitchen and had pulled down two chipped and haggard mixed matched mugs.

"You want the one from Yosemite or Donkey Kong? Keep in mind Donkey Kong is my favorite." Drew called behind his back while filling both to the rim.

"I uh... Yosemite is fine."

"Is black fine too? I don't even have milk and I don't bake so I doubt I have sugar."

"I only drink black, so we are good on that front."

Faye took the mug with more tact than she thought she had. She tried to pat down her sex hair as she sipped on her coffee.

"So Faye, what is making you so uncomfortable? Me, the coffee, or the sex?"

Almost spitting on herself, Faye, coughed and then cleared her throat. "You don't find this awkward at all do you?"

“Nah, in my line of work the morning after happens rather often.”

“And your line of work is?”

“To drunk last night to remember I take it, well I’m a pilot. I fly for FedEx, cargo, mail and the likes.”

Faye didn’t enjoy how her heart picked up at the mention of Drew’s career. All her hungover brain could give to her was images of him his full pilot regalia and her in nothing but his pilots cap. She saw trips to exotic places and drugs, and then Faye blinked and remembered this was 2015 not the fifties.

“Oh, yea right. I take it that is why you don’t have any food other than coffee?”

“Well, I work two weeks on two weeks off and usually only a few days do I actually stay in town. Most of my family lives in Marshall or the surrounding cities. I fly back and stay with them usually a week a month.”

“You have a family?”

Drew smirked, “Yea, three boys.”

“That’s awesome I have an older sister and a younger brother.”

“You want kids Faye?”

Faye blushed and put the coffee mug back on the counter, she was ready for a quick exit. “No, not really.”

Drew’s smirk dropped, “Why not?”

“Personal.”

“Personal?”

“Personal; as in off limits. As in you need to unlock friendship level twenty to access that room of skeletons, and that story.”

Drew laughed a full hand on stomach single tear leaking laugh. “Yea okay, baggage, I got it.”

“You having kids is cool though, I know family is important to most people.”

“Faye, please stop, it is hurting me to watch you flounder. Danny and Peter are thirty-six like me and Louis is thirty-eight, so not my kids, just my family.”

Faye pulled at the hem of her skirt with the sole question in her mind, is it true that the older you get the longer your skirts become? Faye liked to think her skirt was a cute midi length but how does one dress to meet your older boyfriends ‘family’? All Faye wanted was to look more than twenty-two without trying too hard. She knew that if Drew called his friends, in casual passing, family they deserved all her efforts. If looking her age might embarrass Drew, she would fix herself to look older.

“What are Danny’s kid’s names again?”

“Faye, you already made a spreadsheet for my friends and their families. Didn’t you memorized it a week ago?”

“Fine then quiz me, I want to make a good first impression.” Faye nipped at Drew’s cheek, “please.”

“Danny’s wife?”

“Abigail, who is thirty-four. She is on a committee in Marshall, it helps restore historical buildings. Which let me say is beyond boring when trying to study. I think I might actually just avoid talking to her about her work.”

“You love old architecture.”

“The art behind old buildings is wonderful, but the legal jargon is not. Even within the wiki pages, I was overwhelmed, and my bachelors in Art History did not prepare me for that.”

“To be honest I think she is just on the committee to give her something to do.”

“That is reason number two hundred why I don’t want kids: I would hate housewife duties.”

“Worse things in life Faye than having kids, but I’m behind the unburdened life. If you really want to stay on Abby’s good side just don’t mention your tattoos.” Faye in fact had seven tattoos all of which were inked in different cities across the United States.

“Why do you think I’m wearing so much clothing? I’m trying to cover them all up.”

Once the car came to a stop at the light, Drew pulled down the back of Faye’s blouse and kissed the ink covering her left shoulder that read, *‘haunted hearts are beautifully lonely hunters’*. Faye had explained how it paid homage to her life up to her current age, and also two of her favorite books. When Drew had first asked about the real meaning behind it Faye just replied, *“It reminds me that everything comes to an end and it just makes us better, in other words life doesn’t fully matter.”*

“Anyways, next question.” Faye asked.

“Okay then, how old is their daughter?”

“She is the traumatizing age of periods and zits; so twelve.”

The rest of the drive was full of questions and not a single wrong answer. Then when Drew ran out of questions he told Faye how he met Danny.

“My mother forced me to join the t-ball team. I think my love for finger painting and dinosaurs scared her, my mother just wanted me to end up a well-rounded man. My mother could not spare a thought to the fact I found sports dirty and boring. Anyways, I was next to bat, on my third day of practice, and after my second failed attempt to hit the ball I looked around embarrassed at my lack of skills. Then I saw this tiny wisp of a kid pulling down his pants in the dugout. Everyone else was watching me and I was watching Danny. The coach was yelling encouragements at me, but Danny squatted over the bench. I knew he was about to take a shit right in the dugout, and I couldn’t look away. I was watching to see what Danny would do next when I felt a sweaty palm on my shoulder. I jumped and swung the bat hitting my coach right in the gut, thus ending practice for the day. I ran up to the kid, Danny, and just busted out laughing.”

“What's funny?” Danny asked

“You went potty...in public!” Drew replied

“I know. I had to go. So I go.” and that was that they were best friends.

Faye managed to control her laughter just moments before Drew pulled onto Danny's street. The houses lined both sides of the small subdivision. All the houses had a raised deck and a greyscale color for the panels of the house.

“Drew, neighborhoods like these give me the Twilight Zone jeebies.”

“Why? Because the house are so cookie cutter?”

Faye just shrugged and watched as Drew pulled into 310 Oakwood Boulevard. Faye took three deep breathes, grabbed Drew's hand and grounded herself. For Faye meeting new people was easy, it was meeting someone who she knew as important that stressed her out. She imagined all the sentences that would put her into a panic, the gestures that might happen. Faye played through all the scenarios in her head the last week while studying. That was the real reason she memorized everything, she couldn't sleep anyways.

Faye was waiting to tell Drew everything that happened to her growing up. He knew the basics of her 'bad touch' phase of life. He knew he was the first half way decent guy she dated. Drew understood the ponds of misery Faye held in check with her brass eyelashes every day. Drew was smart enough to see the signs of chronic depression, but Faye was managing it. Drew had faith she would tell him everything when she was ready. Plus Drew wasn't sure he was ready to see her as anything other than the carefree Faye he knew. The fear of how he might look at her, after he knew her trauma, kept him from asking her what was wrong most days.

“We can still turn around if you can't do this.”

“What do you mean can’t? Of course I *can* do this, I’m not some crazy person who will explode by just being around families, and I know how to behave, Jesus Drew.” Faye got out of the car and walked up to the front door, waiting for Drew before ringing the doorbell.

“I didn’t mean can’t as in unable, I mean can’t as in *unwilling*.”

Faye ignored him and knocked instead, as she heard footsteps she grabbed Drew’s hand. In Faye’s household positive image was the cardinal rule. Faye’s mother would scream at all hours how to behave at any event. If Faye was going to a slumber party her mother would drill her to remember to take her shoes off at the door. Faye never forgot say please and thank you, yes ma’am, and no sir. Faye learned how to have a firm handshake from her priest and to never demand anything. Faye in essence was the perfect guest. So, when she heard the footsteps her arm reached for Drew. Faye needed to show the world how much of a perfect couple Drew and she was.

“Don’t worry so much it is just Danny...” the door flew open and in front of Faye was his *family*.

Chapter Two

Danny held the phone to his chest as Louis screamed at him from across the country. Danny understood why Louis was upset. Danny had neglected to tell him until today about Drew and Faye dropping into town tomorrow. Danny did not do it because he didn't want to see Louis in fact he missed Louis more than usual. The truth was Danny knew Faye was from a generation where acceptance was the newest fad, it made him nervous. Louis was out per say but Danny had no idea how acute a person's 'gaydar' was.

"Louis, I didn't tell you because you know how excited Drew gets around you. It is as if we mixed family reunion and bachelor party into a whole week. I wanted him to feel in control with him introducing us to his child of a girlfriend. He would not behave if you were here, why do you think he hasn't called you himself?"

"Maybe because only you have my work number?"

"Louis do you have to yell? I understand you're pissed but I mean, in all honesty how long do we see this relationship lasting? Do you even want to meet her?"

"Yes Danny, I do! You should have told me, you know Drew would have handled seeing me just fine. I was just home two months ago or did you forget?"

"I swear to God Louis, I asked you to stop."

"What is the real reason you don't want me coming into town? Over the last few years you've asked me less and less often. Does this have anything to do with Drew or do you just not want me crashing at your place?"

"Of course not, you know Abby would love to see you, and the kids. Nathan still thinks your job is 'the shit' his words."

"Then why didn't you tell me, Danny?" Louis sighed listening to the slight static of Danny's home line.

"The truth? I know you can't take the time off while you are in the middle of a new case and figured you would beat yourself up about it. I thought if I waited until it was too late for you to even catch a flight you would blame me and not yourself. Louie you have enough to worry about without family drama distracting you."

Danny was trying to handle the change in Drew's life the best he could. That on top of any baggage Louis was sure to bring home was too much for him. But Louis could hear in Danny's voice that he was

lying. He could hear the lie in the way he whispered Louie, the only person in his life who called him that. Plus, Danny was correct, he was in the middle of a new case. He was relocating two persons of interest in a case that would send an important man from the Chicago Mob to max security. This woman and her boyfriend was his and his partners to handle until their part of the trial was over. After that his partner Samson and he would set them up in witness protection. Of course then they would have to stay with them for the first three months. This was going to end up as one of his longer stays away from home. Topping in at a total of seven months, minimum, and that is with the case going on without a hiccup.

“I won’t make it home for another six months if I am lucky Danny. It is early enough in the pre-trial business that I could have had Samson cover for me for a few days.”

“Louis, please just stay focused and stay safe for me? For the family? Seeing Drew’s new girlfriend isn’t more important than what you are doing for people.”

Louis stayed silent for a few minutes thinking over what Danny said and realized it wasn’t worth the fight. “Yea, sure Danny for the family. I guess I have to go dark for a few weeks though, can I call after?”

Danny leaned his head against the fridge. His eyes closed, “Louis, when the darkness breaks call me first.”

“First, of course.”

The phone went silent but Danny kept it in place against his ear. He knew of course that going dark meant danger and the chance he might never hear from Louis again. The last time Louis went dark he said it was to last a week. Instead Danny didn’t hear Louis’ voice for six weeks, when he called from a hospital in Phoenix. Louis and Samson had fought off two men for hire. Louis managed to win the fight. He walked away with three fractured ribs, a broken wrist, and enough bruising and swelling to make him look unrecognizable when Danny flew out with the family to see him.

Half of the reason for Louis joining the U.S. Marshalls was because of Danny, and the fight they had on New Years of ’05. Ten years later Louis still hasn’t forgotten. Louis might have forgiven Danny, they talk around the incident without solving it, but it lingers in each phone call.

“Baby, did you get ahold of Louis, I know you’ve have tried the last few weeks?”

Danny opened his eyes to his wife holding a wine glass in one hand and her iPad in the other. Pinterest most likely.

“He said he has to go dark for a while so he won’t make it this time.”

“Didn’t he just go dark? Isn’t that why you couldn’t reach him?”

“I guess he has to go under again. I’m not sure, it wasn’t a long conversation Abby.”

“Well okay. It doesn’t matter much, I doubt Faye is going to stick around long. I don’t know what I find more pathetic, Drew acting like a child or Faye and her clear daddy issues.”

“Sweetie, that is a little too harsh. This is the first girl Drew has brought to see the family since the Monica stuff. He must think she is worth meeting if he is bringing her, he knows the drama that is going to ensue.”

In fact Danny was looking forward to seeing Peter’s face the most. Danny somehow was the only one of the group to always notice Peter’s jealousy of Drew. Usually Peter focused on Drew’s now ex-wife Monica. Now, with Drew managing to date a young woman, Peter was sure to make a scene of hitting on Faye all night. Telling her stories of when he was in Phi Sigma Phi and his rush week, for a way to bond with her.

“I just don’t get what he thinks he is doing bringing her home after just a few months. I get he is having great youthful sex, but is that enough to try to make us like her.”

Danny walked around Abby and into the living room, grabbing the remote. Danny knew getting worked up over Abby saying things like ‘us’, was ridiculous. They had dated since high school and married two years after, she was as much Drew’s family as he was. At the same time though she wasn’t. Abby was on the outside like Peter’s wife Shania was, in a way Monica never could be, even now. Abby was a wife and not a sister, family the same but not blood. That is why Monica still came to holiday gatherings but if Danny left Abby she would not get an invite. Danny didn’t want to allow these thoughts to drift into him. After talking to Louis he always had a hard time for a few hours dealing with Abby and her nagging.

“They are only staying here one night. I am sure she isn’t so wild she doesn’t understand how to behave. If all else fails we can send her to play Animal Crossing with Jill and we can make her sit at the little kids table at dinner tomorrow.”

Abby plops her feet into Danny’s lap, “watch Nathan have a crush on her.”

Chapter Three

Faye took a full Mason jar from Abigail and sipped the sweet concoction. She hummed in appreciation while looking for a plant to dump it into.

“Don’t you just love the Mason jars? I got the idea from Pinterest, I mean people use them in rustic weddings, but I thought they were just too cute. The drink recipe is also from Pinterest, it is a plum version of a Berry Sangria, and I just love the color of it.”

“Yea, Abigail I think they are super crafty.” Faye thought Mason jar drinks were overdone.

“Do you craft then? Drew said you took some art classes in school, last month.”

“I graduated college last spring. Now, I am taking a year off so I could intern at the Grand Rapids Art Museum to prepare me for Grad School.”

Abigail smiled and looked away and called out for her daughter Jill. Faye watched as Jill made a scene of closing her laptop and walking over to what Abigail claimed was the ‘den’.

“Jill tell Faye here what types of art you have started to make. Our Jill here is rather talented. She is first string in both softball and tennis. Jill of course takes after me in the looks department, if you can’t tell. Now with this new artist ability she is a real triple threat. In a few years the boys won’t be able to keep their hands off of her.”

Faye tried to hold back her gag at the obvious competition Abigail tried. Faye was not about to compete with a twelve year old. Faye remembered her preteen years with pain and had no need to rehash it. Instead Faye proceeded to ask a few questions about Jill’s art. Jill told her all about the art form Yaoi, and how she drew banners for fanfiction pieces.

“Fanfiction? You mean that site where people write their own twist on famous books?”

“Yea, so?” Jill popped her gum.

“I used to read that all the time growing up. I was a huge Dramonie shipper.”

Abigail stepped in front of Jill, “Wait, Faye you have read Fanfiction? Isn’t that a little young for you?”

“Funny you should say that Abigail, I think my generation was the one that took on the platform and launched it to what it is now. Of course I don’t read it anymore, but it is more because I’ve read all the good ones.” Faye smiled when Jill laughed.

“I keep having a hard time finding good ones too! I ship Destile, you know from Supernatural?”

“Cas and Dean, okay I could see it, more the later years though.”

Faye spent the next hour bonding over art and books with Jill. While Abigail drank Mason jar after Mason jar of her failed attempt at crafting. Danny tried to ask Abigail why she was standing in the kitchen instead of socializing but all he could get from her was a snarky *I’m not needed*. During this Drew was trying to beat Nathan at Rocket League on the PlayStation.

“Nate, how do I turn around? Why am I going backwards?”

“Uncle Drew you need to push the uh *joystick* thing forward, away from you.”

“Oh, okay I got this.” Drew had his tongue sticking out from the corner of his mouth when he felt a finger tap it.

“You are cute when you are trying to fit it with the kiddos.” Faye placed a chaste kiss on his lips and turns back to Jill.

Drew noticed how Nathan was purposely looking away from him. “So bud, I can see you have something you want to ask?”

Nathan shook his head no and proceeded to score a goal. “Better work on your defense Uncle Drew.”

“Don’t worry I still have a minute to win it. Haven’t you heard of all my great comebacks in high school? Take my sophomore year, I was a forward on the Varsity basketball team. It was the last game of the season before playoffs and your dad went to pass the ball to Uncle Peter. But, Peter is a luck player, he has great days but most of his days were just okay. This was one of his okay days. I knew Peter wasn’t going to catch the ball I sprinted across the court and caught it mid-air. Then I swished it from the three-point line, scoring our final basket with two seconds to spare and winning the game! You could say I am best at last minute attempts.”

Across the room Danny laughed, “Don’t let him fool you Nate! We were up twelve points, had a whole five minutes left at least, plus I wasn’t passing to Uncle Pete, he was. The opposite team batted it out of the air and then he caught it and dribbled it in for a layup. Uncle Drew here is only good at exaggerating the truth. I mean we were all on Varsity because there wasn’t enough of us to make a J.V. team.”

“Well my story was better at least, right Nate?”

Nathan took a few deep breathes before blurting out, “well you didn’t exaggerate how hot Faye is.”

“Thank you!”

Faye did not at the time realize that those two words acting as the climax of the night. Abigail had looked on from the kitchen through the conversation. She thought how she was glad Faye was talking to Jill instead of Nathan. Nathan who she knew was already much too interested in girls.

When Abigail heard the compliment her hand squeezed the jar with so much force she heard her knuckles pop. Instead the living room erupted in laughter and Drew slapped Nathan on the back saying that *no I did not*. Abigail grabbed her cell phone and dialed Shania.

“Shania, when are you getting here?”

“I’m running late. Apparently Trevor *would rather hang out with Stacy then spend time with his family!*”

“Stop screaming at him and just drag him and Peter over here, it is a train wreck.”

“Why, is she actually hideous? I knew Drew was lying, I mean we all know Louis has aged the best and even Louis isn’t bring hot twenty year old’s home.”

“Louis doesn’t bring anyone home, but that isn’t the point. She isn’t ugly...according to Nate, she is ‘hot’.”

“Oh no. Little Nathan said that?”

“Yes! And it gets worse, she is bonding with Jill. They are talking about her British T.V. shows now. I can hear Jill laughing with her. I can’t even get Jill to speak to me without sarcasm. This twat, Faye comes in here and just has Danny and Drew talking about the good ol’ days and my kids are getting along. Meanwhile, I’m hiding away in the kitchen drinking sangria from a fucking MASON JAR. All to try and look young and crafty!”

“Okay Abby just hold it together for another half hour max okay? Can you do that? Good, I’ll text when we get on the road.”

Abigail did not hold it together. It took only five minutes before she snapped. Abigail had calmed herself down with two more drinks. She walked out into the living room and sat right in-between her daughter and Faye and put her arms around them.

“Isn’t it weird, girls, to think about how if I was just a little older you two could be sisters?”

“Mom, that’s gross she’s with Uncle Drew.”

“Yea, but sweetie she only started to drink...legally, what, a week ago?”

“No, I’m almost twenty-three. Plus I think the legal drinking age should lower to eighteen anyways.”

“*Of course you do.*”

“Excuse me? What do you mean, of course I do?”

Abigail turned to face Faye and placed a hand on Faye’s knee. “I meant *sweetie* that you clearly weren’t raised with the same morals I raise my children in. I mean coming in here talking about Fanfiction, I do know what it is Jill, a bunch of gay porn! You think I want you encouraging my daughter to read that filth?”

“Mom! It isn’t just—”

“Hush Jill. Faye, I’m not trying to attack you.” Faye tried to interject, “but I just do not think you are the best influence for my daughter to bond with. I mean all you are teaching her is, having an older well established man take care of you is okay.”

Faye stood up and tried to get more than an offended huff out. Instead Faye just grabbed her purse and went straight out the front door. The living room remained in an awkward lull. Jill broke the silence with screaming how unfair her mother was, and how cool and mature Faye was. Which followed with Nathan shutting off the PlayStation and slinking away into his room. Finally Drew sent a glare towards Abigail.

“Real nice Abby.”

“Drew I am just pointing out what everyone is thinking.”

Drew just threw, “I’m going to go check up on Faye” over his shoulder. When Drew got outside he found Faye sitting on the front step breathing into her knees. He sat next to her, and tried to think of something to say. Drew was not in fact surprised that Abigail had acted out. He was sure that if she didn’t say something Shania was going too. Drew tried to think of something to say that wasn’t just making excuses for his family. He needed to say something that wouldn’t sound like he led Faye into this situation on purpose. Just because he knew it was going to happen, didn’t mean he wasn’t hoping it wouldn’t.

“Faye I’m—”

“Save it Drew, I called an Uber, should be here soon. I’m going home, alone. I get this is your *family* but I told you I didn’t want to do this yet, I begged you to realize how hard families of any type are. Instead you drag me here and I comply, I even get myself half excited. You abandoned me to play a stupid video game, which I get because bonding with your nephew, or whatever. But then Abigail attacks me and you sit by and do nothing, I flee the house and you sit by and do nothing again.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say, it is clear, I’m sorry is wrong.”

“How about don’t go? How about I’ll come home with you? How about you were right we are going too fast and I’m sorry! How about anything?”

Faye started pacing across the front lawn, wishing for a flower bed or a simple tulip she could ruin. Faye wasn’t upset about what Abigail had said to her, it went deeper and darker. Faye felt uncomfortable and isolated, she just wanted to go home and drink a bottle of wine with her roommate Stella. She wanted to forget about families or how hard she had tried.

“Faye, I am sorry, I don’t want you to leave. Peter and Shania are coming anytime and I know they want to meet you. Danny will force some water and food into Abby and it will calm down okay? Families are crazy, this one is mine and sometimes the wives get a little catty.”

“The wives, nice. Sounds like a movie from the fifties I did not agree to act in.”

“That isn’t what I meant, you know that.”

“Drew, maybe the age gap is too much. Sure, I don’t notice it when it is just you and I, but around other people it is so obvious that we don’t come from the same world. Who are we trying to fool? I’m an eco-conscious modern feminist and you. . . you only care about yourself and family.”

“I care about you, Faye.”

The Uber driver pulled into the driveway. Faye just stared at the driver for a moment wondering why she had called it.

“I’m going home, Drew, alone.”

Chapter Four

Drew watched as the car drove away and he couldn't stop the frustrated punch he let fly. It of course did nothing to the air around him except make him feel much younger than his thirty six years. Drew wondered if Faye was taking the Uber all the way home, or if she was stopping in Battle Creek to see her parents and sister. Either way he knew he would not be wanted, by not following Faye into the car he knew she would not want to see him for a few days.

Faye knew that Drew would stay behind, in the last three months Faye had realized how hard it was for Drew to act on what he was feeling, and the fact was Drew never knew what to call his feelings. He was raised with a steel fist and a paddle that taught him to redirect his feelings to the back of his mind. Faye left and Drew went inside and wondered what he was even supposed to do to make it up to her.

"Hey man, we heard a car, did Faye leave?" Danny asked.

"She called an Uber before I even got outside."

"An Uber all the way back to Grand Rapids, I'm surprised she was willing to pay for that, and the driver was willing to drive so far."

"I don't think she is going back her apartment right away, her family lives in Battle Creek, they don't get on, but the drive is only twenty minutes from here I'd guess."

"Wait have you met her folks?"

"No, like I said they don't have a good relationship. Faye's mom is a little unbalanced and on a lot of medication and her dad is cool I guess, just not much older than us. She said it would turn into an awkward fight between her folks."

"So you just aren't ever going to meet them? How does that work, what if you guys got married."

"Jesus Danny, she just flew out of here because of *your* wife, I don't even know if she is still interesting in making us work, I doubt marriage is on her mind."

"Just saying you married Monica when you were younger than her, it is probably on her mind a little bit. You could support her and her art career and even take her on vacations she would have to wait years to afford."

"What the fuck man, why are you attacking her?"

"I'm not."

"You are calling her a gold digger."

“I’m just wondering if you realize what you are doing. So do you?”

Drew turned away from Danny and thought that maybe this was the attitude Faye had felt for the past hour. Had she felt attacked the whole time she was here? Drew knew they looked a little unconventional but the age gap wasn’t obscene. He wasn’t some old man with millions, he was not even middle aged. Just because he held a decent job and because he elected to forgo kids he was able to save up a decent amount did not mean that was all Faye saw in him. Faye who lived in a two bedroom with three people. Faye, who recycled everything and gave the money from cans to homeless people on the streets. Faye, who shopped at goodwill and refurbished all of her clothes because she loved the feeling of wearing something for years. She would say it would fit only her body perfectly at that point. All of her clothes were a second skin to Faye.

“Danny she isn’t with me for my money or anything like that.”

“Drew I just think her storming out of here was a little immature don’t you? Do you really want to date someone who is so young and naïve?”

“Danny, I don’t know much about Faye yet, but *your* wife was the drunk immature one here. I don’t have to defend my love life to you. I don’t know if your jealous, embarrassed, or just trying to do what you think is the correct this here, but just stop while you are behind.”

Drew grabbed his jacket of the coat rack, “Tell Pete I’m sorry I bailed. I’m going to fix a mess your wife made. Tell Abby to sober up or something.”

The Uber dropped Faye off at the Barnes and Nobel in Battle Creek, where she browsed the new Non-fiction while she waited for Stella to pick her up. The twenty minute drive gave Faye enough time to process who she was really upset with. Was it with the fact that she still flinched when Abigail and Danny hugged her? Or was it with the fact that she could only really talk to a twelve year old? Faye couldn’t help but realize that maybe her anger was misdirected at Drew. Did Faye want to see Abigail again, no, but would she if it meant fixing things with Drew, yes.

Faye ended up picking up a book called The Aviators Wife a creative non-fiction piece about the Lindbergh’s. Was Faye ever going to become an aviator’s wife? Did Drew even want to get married again, did she want to get married at all? Faye pondered all of these questions when she felt her phone ring in her pocket. She put the book back with a longing stare, hoping it had a decent ending.

Faye and Stella drove back to their apartment without speaking much. Stella having known Faye for five years could read her moods, she knew what Faye needed most was to stare at the window and let her

thoughts calm themselves down, and maybe a bottle of red wine as well. From the phone call earlier Stella knew that the age difference between Faye and Drew exploded on her, which she assumed it would. Stella was not uncomfortable with the age gap like Drew's friends were. Stella always thought that Faye needed an older man, someone with more experience, someone who would understand that Faye wasn't a party till four a.m. twenty-two year old, her soul was older than that.

"I couldn't even hug them without feeling my skin crawl." Faye broke the silence.

"You'll get used to it, plus I'm sure they just read your hesitation as nerves, I'm sure they didn't find it all that odd."

Stella reached over for Faye's hand and again they lapsed into silence, hands clasped for comfort. Stella and Faye had met each other freshman year when they realized they had three classes together. It took two weeks before Faye got up the courage to sit by Stella, whose beauty she was intimidated by. When she did Stella turned to her and said *aren't we in a bunch of classes together?* Turns out Stella and Faye were kindred spirits, both had grown up with less than ideal living situations and had suffered through chronic depression and a longing to escape. Holding hands they kept each other alive through all the worse traumas of college. When Faye got life threatening heart palpitations from drinking too much coffee her sophomore year, Stella was with her almost nonstop for three weeks, making her drink tea anytime she craved coffee. Stella rubbed her neck when the caffeine headaches would get to the point Faye would scream and throw up for hours. Likewise when Stella started to take Adderall to make it through her pre-law classes and then just because she couldn't stop taking them, Faye made sure she ate enough. Faye even went as far as to do half of her homework for a few weeks so Stella would not take anymore.

"Faye, do you want me to call Lucy? We can have a Netflix night and drink? We can order Chinese?"

"Lucy is in Jackson with her boyfriend's family, I'd rather not bother her."

Freshman year Faye had gone into the dorms blind and ended up with Lucy as a roommate. It was the best random happening Faye has had. Lucy was calm but fun, she came from a happy well-to-do family and she knew how to love. Faye was drawn to her easy laughs and her pure genuine happiness. Lucy had known enough pain to understand Faye's haunted eyes, but also had enough of a privileged life that she was stable and mentally normal. Where Stella and Faye picked up each other's fractured pieces, Lucy kept Faye from needing to fracture, she kept Faye solid. Faye had lived with Lucy for two years and then when Faye

realized that all Lucy wanted was to live with her going on four years at the time boyfriend, Faye felt a pang of regret.

“Did you not tell me you wanted to live with Dylan because you were afraid of what I would say, or something?” Faye asked.

“No, I just know that we live together well and how hard it is for you to let people in, I didn’t want you to feel like I was leaving you or anything. I mean we can all live together if you want?”

“Boo thang, do you want the cab, or the Chianti?” Stella asked over Blink-182 blasting from the T.V.

“Which one has more?”

“Chianti.”

Stella and Faye danced in the living room drinking wine and vodka until two a.m. when there was a knock on the door. Both girls stopped and looked at each other, a quick game of nose goes and Faye sighed and went to answer to knock, she assumed it was their grumpy neighbor Ms. Daniells, someone who at only thirty was not of fan of their dance parties. Faye swung the door open already having a *don’t worry Ms. Daniells we are going to bed now* ready, instead she was face to face with a worried looking Drew holding a bottle of Chianti.

“What’s that?” Faye pointed at the bottle.

“I figured you’d drink one of your bottles tonight, I had a fifty-fifty chance of guessing which one you’d drink.”

“You were right, I hate that you were right.” Faye wasn’t talking about the wine. Drew was right when he said they could leave if she couldn’t handle meeting his family, she couldn’t handle it, and she never wanted to make the attempt again.

“Can I come in?”

“What took you so long to come?”

Drew looked down and contemplated lying to her and telling her he had sat outside her apartment for a few hours wondering if she would allow him inside. The truth was he didn’t know until a few hours ago if he wanted to save their relationship, he wasn’t sure it was worth the effort it was already costing. Danny and Peter had found him at the bar drinking Jack and Cokes and told him that if Faye was even willing to try than

Drew better be willing to try as well. Danny had seen Drew stand up for Faye in a way that he never once did in all the years dating, and married to Monica.

“I wasn’t sure about anything.” Drew finally said.

“Me either.”

“Can I stay?”

“Are you going to stay?” Faye asked a few tears brimming on her eyelids.

“I think for a while, yes.” Drew responded.

Chapter Five

The next evening found Danny and Peter cooking the steaks that went unused the night before. Danny had thought about inviting Faye and Drew back today as a do-over but Danny fully assumed Drew was not going to go back to Faye. He was hoping that Drew would just grow up and get back with Monica, they were family and he just needed to realize that having someone know you better than anyone else, having a single person who would choose your life before anyone else's is not insane or frightening, in fact it was freeing and empowering in the same moment.

"Have you heard from Louis? I'm sure he would get a kick out of hearing how Abby couldn't resist making a scene. Every family dinner Louis and I have a poll of how many drinks it will take until Abby says something that starts an uproar. Louis almost always wins."

"I didn't know you two did that, don't let Abby find out. She loves Louis, she says he is the only one out of us that ever listens to her. But I talked to him a few days ago, he said he has to go dark for a bit, he was bummed out he couldn't come last night, I tried to tell him we all understand, and I told him it isn't like Faye is going to stick around for the long term. Drew is going to wise up and go back to Monica within the year I'm sure of it."

Peter tightened his hand on his Budweiser bottle, "I think Monica is... both of them are better off separated."

"You've never really liked them together. I remember eight grade when you were going to ask her out and Drew bet you that she would say yes to him over you. What did you lose again?"

"My rare Charizard Pokémon card. Drew was less awkward looking than me in eighth grade, it wasn't really fair. I mean had I asked Monica out say our junior year in high school, she might have picked me."

"Except by junior year Monica was already planning their wedding. I remember she would come over to my house to play basketball with me and she would just carry on non-stop about what 'her boys' were going to wear in their wedding. It is scary accurate to what we actually were forced to wear."

"Those bowties were horrible, I felt like my Adams Apple was going to be pulped."

Danny laughed and remembered how Louis had to tie his for him and how Louis also untied it that night, when he was too drunk.

“Yea, I wonder why Drew divorced Monica, or better yet why Monica let him leave. Monica has to know that Drew is acting out some weird youthful fantasy with Faye. It can’t end up as anything serious, right Pete.”

Peter shrugged sipping his beer, “I mean I always thought Monica would have kids and I know Drew said that is why they ended things, they wanted different futures.”

“Monica would make a scary mom, very overbearing, and you know she would be a helicopter parent.”

“As if Abby is a good mom.”

“Hey! I didn’t bash on Shania, don’t bring Abby into the mix.”

“Sorry.” Peter said, Danny shrugged it off. “I just meant that of all of us to have kids I expected Monica and Louis to have them first. Funny how it worked out though. I mean you speak to Louis the most, does he have his eyes set on anyone yet? I mean he isn’t getting any younger.”

“Peter you know Louis’ job doesn’t give much extra time for relationships. He spends all his free time visiting us, and keeping up with the family. I don’t think he is looking for someone yet.”

“Drew says he is married to the job. Maybe we should have an intervention and tell him he needs to man up and settle down.”

Danny forced out a chuckle while he plated the steaks. “I don’t think we will see him dating a girl for a long time.”

“Shania was saying she has some girl friends who could handle his lifestyle. If I give you their names would you pass on the information to Louis? Or do you think the next time he is home I should just surprise him with a bouquet of middle aged desperate women and wine.” Peter couldn’t contain his laughter and ended up spilling the rest of his bottle of beer in the lawn.

“I’ll pass on the information.” Danny knew that Louis still slept with many women but the fact was he couldn’t handle thinking about Louis with anyone. His vision would go hazy and his chest would restrict airflow. The idea of Louis laying naked next to any type of person made Danny bite the inside of cheek until he tasted blood. It didn’t help that most times when Danny thought of Louis dating he pictured a sweaty naked man in Louis bed, on top of Louis, underneath Louis, and the man always looked like himself.

“I’m just saying I think Louis deserves happiness, all he does for other people, some chick will realize soon enough that Louis is a catch, even if he does have crappy working hours. I mean Louis for some reasons looks better than all of us, and he is older. When did he become the attractive one?”

“He was always the attractive one. Anyways maybe Monica and Louis should get together then, if you think they both want kids so bad. They would make stunning babies.”

“No. Monica wouldn’t do that. She sees Louis as a brother.”

“She sees us all as brothers, minus Drew of course.”

Peter disagreed, he knew Monica didn’t view him as brother, he knew that deep down Monica still felt something for him. Peter would notice Monica’s longing for Shania’s life when asking her about their kids, or what it was like to have her husband around all the time. Monica was never cut out for a pilot’s lifestyle, she deserved constant attention, something Drew never wanted to give her, but Peter could.

Chapter Six

Drew repacked his flight bag for the sixth time each time reminding himself to grab his new 2016 planner. He pulled out his head set checked the cords for any loose wires or breakage. He pulled out his flight log and the small picture Drew had taken with Faye's retro Polaroid slide out again. He traced his thumb over the photo of Faye crossing her eyes but smiling at him before putting it back, just to have it fall out the seventh time. The last time Drew was this nervous to leave it was his first two weeks on the job, over ten years ago. Maybe what had Drew so nervous was the fact that after five months of dating Faye, Drew just now found out about Ralph and what he still meant to Faye.

After having issues reaching Faye for two days over the phone, Drew drove to her apartment and Lucy answered the door. Lucy explained that Faye was just in a sad way and that he was welcomed in if he wanted to, but if not she had it under control. Drew walked in thinking it was just a bout of depression, maybe worse than he had seen in the past five months, but still nothing new. Drew had never experienced true chronic depression before, and he was finding it hard to plan around. He knew he was leaving in three days for two weeks, if Faye was slipping into a depressed mental state, Drew did not feel comfortable leaving her.

The truth was Faye had slipped into her depressed state, but it was not irrational or random this time, it was personal and it was about the past. A past that Drew was trying so hard to beat back with whatever happiness he could bring Faye, but Faye refused most days to tell him about her past. She would say she did not want to taint his vision of her, she did not want to burden him. Why tell someone about something they can do nothing about? It already happened so what good is punishing someone with the knowledge?

Faye was curled up with her grey heated blanket watching *American Horror Story*. She smiled for a brief moment when seeing Drew then she closed her eyes and sighed. She did not tell him to leave instead she lifted her legs so he could sit down, then she placed the blanket over them both and put her legs in Drew's lap. Drew started rubbing at her soles and Faye exhaled in contentment.

Drew let two episodes fly away from them, Lucy had left after brewing a pot of tea for them. At the start of the third episode Drew paused it and looked over at Faye. Faye refused to meet his gaze instead she picked at the hem of the blanket.

"Are you going to tell me anything?"

"Do you need to know what is happening inside my messed up head? You know my brain is wired different than yours, sometimes I get sad, and Drew I can't stop."

“What were you thinking that brought you to this point?”

“It isn’t just thoughts, depression is biological as much as it is taught by experiences. Drew, don’t ask about my sadness I don’t want you to fail to understand.”

“What makes you think I can’t handle hard stories?”

“Because my past isn’t a story it’s a truth.”

“Then tell me your truths.” So Faye told him of Michael and how she fell in love with the back of his neck.

“I sat behind him in my cultural anthropology class. For some reason I would stare all lecture at his neck and hair, something about it was masculine, the Orion’s belt of freckles that dipped under his collar. He would longboard into class and he was six three and his build was so wrong for longboarding, he looked like a floating giant. The thing is if I fell in love with his neck I felt the most overwhelming need for him when he would skate down the main campus hill. I ached for him to like me back, he was the first boy I had found attractive since...my last break up. The thing about Michael was, he was a junior in a frat and I was a senior counting my days to get out of school. I was over college and his pride outshined most bible-thumpers. I needed to fall in love with his easy smile, I was so desperate for affection when I met him. The thing is when he finally leaned into me on a Tuesday after class and I felt his plump lips against mine, I realized I was thinking about what to get for dinner. Don’t laugh, I had waited weeks for him to make a move and when he did I realized I just wanted the chase, I wanted to feel wanted again, and I didn’t actually need to act on his affections.”

“Are you saying you’re sad because you wish you would have acted on it?” Drew asked.

“No, not at all. The thing was I let him kiss me for a while and I kissed back, the whole time wondering what about him I found so lackluster. You see I’m not upset at all about Michael, but I ended up pulling away from him and he must have read it on my face that I didn’t enjoy his physical presence any longer, because he stopped sitting in front of me. He never actually spoke to me again after that. I think he might have felt the gap between our spirits, I wasn’t whole enough to really love him, but he was the last boy I claim to have loved.”

“Faye, babe I don’t understand what this has to do with you being sad.”

“Michael was the last *boy* I loved, but because I was so distraught over not being able to try and date him it put me in a vulnerable situation. I was angry at myself and confused when I met Ralph, and Ralph was

the first *man* I loved. Man as in he was twenty eight and he wanted a wife and family, the whole kit and caboodle as my dad would say. You got to understand Drew I was about to graduate college with a degree that I feared would turn out as useless. I lost so many loves in college I felt utterly behind in life. I think Ralph just saw my DNA though, I was young and I look like a women, I have boobs for days and hips but I was fit, I think he just wanted his kids to look like me. I know that sounds crazy, but aren't all failed love stories insane? I let Ralph think he could marry me and I'd have his kids, I never said explicitly I wanted kids, I just never said I didn't. I have known since I was sixteen I'd never rent out the home of my womb to anyone's child, mine included. I wanted to remain empty and free. I spent the last year of college lying to both of us, pretending to be who he wanted, and I told myself he'd grow out of children, it was a phase that showed his age."

"Is this the same guy who you were drinking to forget the night I met you?"

"Yea, they say it takes three months for every year you are with someone to get over them, I was on my fourth month but it didn't hurt any less."

"So what was his final straw?" Drew did not want to say it in a way that put the blame on Faye, but she had lied for a year over something so important, the same something that had broken up his marriage.

"That's the funny part, I had spent so many days trying to make myself believe I wanted a child at the same time I tried to get him over wanting to be a dad. He just couldn't stop treating my body as the key to his happiness and it took me awhile to realize that physical love doesn't always equate soul love. He didn't have a last straw, I did. I broke his heart, Drew, because I snapped. Ralph and I weren't using condoms, like I said I was giving him false hope, I never went off my birth control, I just pretended I did. Of course though I got pregnant, karma I'd call it, I mean birth control works ninety-nine percent of the time. I kept refusing to marry him, I kept saying I wanting to wait to after grad school, but I knew we weren't going to last, I was lying every day to him, and he was wasting time with me, but I couldn't just leave him. He was everything my mother had brought me up to find, he could and would take care of me and our children, and I wouldn't have to work. I'm fucked you know? Can't move on from what my mother raised me as. So here I was twenty-one and pregnant and disgusted with myself."

"I never knew you had a child."

"I don't. Ralph thought with a baby on the way we'd of course get married. He told everyone we knew about the *good news*. I was mortified because I knew I was not having this child. I took Stella and Lucy

with me and I got an abortion on Wednesday the fourteenth of April at three-twenty in the afternoon. I broke Ralph's heart because he loved my womb in a way he used to love me, and when I saw how repulsed he found me after what I did, I realized he never did love me, because he never knew the honest me. Drew, I haven't experienced much death, I'm lucky that way. But the day I got an abortion I killed Ralph's child, not mine, just his. I've made numerous mistakes in life, and a lot of them fall with Ralph, but I do not for second think he had the right to hate me for what I did, but I still understood his hate. He threw me out of his life after what I did and I have never felt so betrayed by myself and someone else."

Faye turned her eyes from where they were trained on her fingers to study Drew's response. He was looking at his foot tracing a pattern in the carpet. Faye didn't know what she wanted to come of this conversation, but it wasn't over yet.

"Why is you need to never have kids so strong you would abort the baby? Why not deliver it and give it to Ralph, you wouldn't have to raise it, he could act as an only father, like he choose to adopt the kid, why just kill it?"

"I don't think I killed a living being, I killed cells, and I killed the possibility of a person. When I went to get the abortion I asked for a sonogram first. I'm not sure why, maybe I was hoping for a miracle and I wouldn't have a thing inside of me anymore. Instead I got a picture of a lumpy cellular blob. I told you I was raised Catholic but I ended up leaving the church my junior year of high school. The truth is I still prayed to the Christian God until the moment I held the picture of the cells growing in my womb. In that moment I left Catholicism fully leave me because I did not see life in that photo, I saw science. I saw the idea of a soul but I did not see the actual soul. I saw my death in its life and I resented the hell out of a few cells, so no I did not want to birth an unwanted child into this world. I did not hesitate to terminate. I have not felt regret but I have struggled and am struggling to accept myself now. That Drew is what religion did to me. It made me hate who I am, as if my true self is evil and wrong, so sometimes Drew my sadness isn't a simple answer. My sadness in multilayered and I saw Ralph two days ago with his pregnant fiancé and I realized that was almost me, and I hated myself for the happiness I felt when I realized it would never be me."

"Faye I don't know what to say."

Chapter Seven

“I know his case is classified but I’m *family*! I have a right to know why I haven’t heard from him in two months!”

Danny had called over ten different government departments the last week trying to find any information on Louis and his disappearance. Louis had gone dark for eight weeks and Danny knew something was wrong, Louis had never gone dark for so long before. Drew had told him not to panic and Peter said it was just part of the job, but neither of them knew Louis’ job like Danny did. Danny had spent countless nights with Louis drinking whiskey and listening in horror over the things Louis would have to do in order to keep someone safe. How many people he has killed, people without names, but with faces Louis could draw with painstaking accuracy. Danny couldn’t help but remember the several drunken phone calls from hotels, with Louis crying while telling him as much as he legally could about the case he was working. The amount of death Louis had to shift through just to save a halfway decent person, criminals that could send worse criminals to jail. Danny knew Louis did not need to go dark for so long and he couldn’t get the fire in his bones to stop burning. It felt as if it was going to burn out his chest and char his ribs.

Finally a recognizable voice was put on the line. “Danny, its Samson here.”

“Oh thank God, what’s going on? Louis hasn’t called to check in, it has been two months since the last time he called.”

Danny heard a frustrated sigh across the line, “Danny don’t you think it is time to let Louis let you go?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You know what I am talking about. I have spent the last three weeks begging and bribing Louis not to call you, you are not good for him. Don’t you want him to find happiness?”

“I have no idea what you are insinuating but Louis is *family* my *brother* just my brother.”

“Yea okay Daniel.”

“Wait! Can I talk to Louis?”

“Why?”

Why, the one answer Danny did not have the strength of character to answer. Danny could claim it was all in the name of family, but it would have fallen off his tongue flat for it was a lie of omission. Danny needed to know if Louis was okay because Danny needed Louis to always end up okay.

Chapter Eight

Drew had to catch a flight out to Kentucky where he was stationed for the next two weeks no later than eight that night. He was finally finished repacking around two and as he sat on his bed he just wanted to reach over a stroke Faye's hair. Instead he loaded up his car and drove for two hours. He parked in his usual spot, oil stain right where he left it, he let himself in with his key, and made himself a peanut butter sandwich.

It took Monica twenty more minutes to exit the shower and make her way downstairs just to see Drew making a second sandwich. His form gave her a slight elevated heartrate, half because she was startled, not having seen him in four months, half because he was in his pilots' uniform and she had so many fond memories of that outfit.

"Drew, what are you doing in my kitchen?"

"Technically it is still my kitchen, I pay the mortgage."

"*Fine*, why are you in my borrowed kitchen?"

Drew waited until he had finished the rest of his meal before turning around on the barstool and addressing his ex-wife. An ex-wife who was still dripping from her shower and was in nothing but a satin nightgown.

"It is almost four, why are you dressed like that?"

"Maybe I had plans for tonight, or maybe I was just coming down to get water and was going to change later."

"Are you sleeping with someone?"

"Does it matter, you are." Monica challenged.

Drew thought it over, and found that he was for the first time maybe not okay with the actual act of her moving on, but he could handle her sleeping with someone. Drew knew it wasn't fair of him, but Monica was his for so long, he had a hard time trying to let go of her.

"I guess it doesn't matter, unless he is in better shape than me." Drew winked at Monica.

"You are dating a child and you ask me not to date someone in better shape. You still are as obnoxious as ever. But in all seriousness what are you doing here."

"I...Faye...I'm here because I think I might have got myself into a situation I might make worse."

"Is it illegal?"

"No, no it's not illegal."

“Okay, then what happened?”

“Faye was telling me about some of the trauma she’s experienced and it is a lot and I don’t even know half of it. I mean she doesn’t even acknowledge her childhood. But the point is so told me that she got an abortion less than a year ago, and I didn’t know how to handle that, or if I want to handle it.”

“What did you say to her when she told you?”

“That I didn’t know what to say, then I left and haven’t spoken to her since.”

“You are an idiot Drew. What are you doing with a child who had a baby?”

“She didn’t have the baby though so doesn’t that make her and I like minded. I mean I never want kids, never have. I just don’t understand why this is something I find so hard to understand.”

“Drew, why are you telling me this? I doubt Faye would take me knowing her very personal business well.”

“Monica it is us, we tell each other everything, always have. I am not going to stop now just because we aren’t married.”

“Drew, maybe we should, my therapist says it isn’t healthy for use to remain so close, at least not for a while.”

“We divorced over four years ago, doesn’t your therapist think that is enough time.”

Monica sighed and filled up a tea kettle and counted to twenty in her head before she addressed Drew. “Why did you come to me with this? Isn’t Danny or Peter available? Why me Drew, why do you always come back to me and then leave. Why do you keep me wrapped up in your life?”

“Because you are family.”

“Not anymore I’m not, you left me.”

“Mon, you are family before we married, before we even started dating, you are part of the five. Danny, Louis, Peter, you, and me no matter what we are family at the end of the day.”

“Grow up Drew, it doesn’t work like that. Family is not unconditional, you are burning all of the love I hold for you out of me. How do you think it makes me feel to know you think we are so past our love that you can come to me with you knew childish relationship problems? How do you expect me to handle this? Do you think I am over you or something, because I’m not! You won’t let me get over you, you keep coming to me and calling me your family and telling me you love me like *family*. You’ve made me hate that word!”

The kettle whistled. “Just what do you want from me anymore?”

Drew was shocked to hear such an outburst from Monica, if he thought about everything that had happened between the two of them, he could admit he was surprised she still allowed him in any part of her life. Drew honestly thought that he was doing the kind thing for both of them by staying in her life. He viewed Monica as a permanent part of his life, even if it meant as his ex-wife.

“I want only what you can give me.”

“What if I don’t have anything left to give you?” Monica responded.

“Mon, you’ll always be my co-pilot.”

“What if we have to ground our plane?”

“For how long?”

“Until it doesn’t hurt to fly anymore.”

Drew left Monica in the kitchen with chilled tea in her mug, he drove the rest of the way to the airport not thinking about Faye and Ralph but rather about how for the first time since third grade Drew might have to live without Monica and he felt the confusion of the divorce run through his veins. Drew boarded the plane and took off without checking his phone. He didn’t see how Faye had called him twice and left a novels worth of text. He in fact wouldn’t see her text until the next day and by then Faye wasn’t willing to respond to him. Drew spent two weeks flying and wondering if he had anyone to come home to.

Chapter Nine

Faye had her paintbrush posed above the figure of a raven, she pondered at the emotion that laid beneath the wings of the raven. She wanted the bird to feel the air pockets pushing her wings up and propelling her farther into her future. Instead the raven cocked her head at Faye with a melancholy fold to her wings, as if asking why the wind went stale. Faye dipped her brush in more black paint and positioned her brush above the canvas again. As much as Faye wanted to make the bird unchained, she couldn't will her hand to paint over the raven. The raven looked at her as if knowing that one cannot paint over the truth, the truth always appears again. Faye watched as the power in the sad drop of the feathers brought the raven a strength. A strength that while hard to look directly at was more profound than ignorance. Faye dropped her paintbrush into the murky water and wiped her hands off on her smock. Who was she to tell the raven how to feel, maybe feeling sad was better than not feeling anything.

"Hey boo thang, how's the painting coming?"

"The dumb bird doesn't understand that she is so lucky! I mean she can fly anywhere she wants and yet she won't stay happy. I can get one wing, one set of feathers in her face happy, and the next moment I look over and realize she is sad again. I can't figure out why I keep painting her sad. This is the fourth time I've painted this raven in the past two days and in all of them she is looking back at me with those coal eyes, almost begging me to shoot her out of the sky."

"Ever think she is lonely?" Stella asked while bending over for a closer look, "I mean you have her flying in this giant open sky and maybe she is sick of feeling the air lifting her up without anyone around to hear her shouts of excitement. Or maybe you are telling yourself that for the first time you don't feel as free as you are used to. I mean you haven't heard from Drew yet, and I mean not to be too literal but he flies, and you both are alone, maybe you just can't paint the raven as happy, because in this moment you aren't all that happy, Faye."

Faye picked up her phone, "Drew actually called before I woke up. I haven't listened to the voicemail yet." Faye took off her smock and pulled up her tube socks. She padded her way into the kitchen and went to pour herself a glass of wine, before she realized it was only eleven in the morning.

"Why haven't you played it?" Stella asked.

"What if he says something I don't want to hear?" Faye replied.

“What if he doesn’t? What if he says something to make you forgive him? Maybe he says the exact something that sends you flying happy again?”

“Okay, and if he does, what does that say about me? My happiness revolves around Drew now?”

“Not all of it.” Stella replied, “I’ve never known you to dedicate all of your happiness into a guy, but some of it is effected by Drew, some of his happiness is effected by you too. So at least it isn’t uneven.”

Stella picked up her coat and said she would see Faye later, she had to get to her class. Faye walked back over to the painting and turned her head sideways. Faye thought maybe the raven wasn’t unhappy just burdened. The raven just needed to open up and realize that not everyone can see a pair of wings dipped in ink and see potential. Just because the raven gaped at Faye to paint her something better did not mean she couldn’t survive what she had, but maybe she didn’t have to, maybe the raven did, Faye thought deserve to let more than just the air lift her up.

Faye wanted to call Drew and talk about how they left things all dark and twisty; tell him how she wasn’t damaged goods and she was happy with him, just some days she couldn’t push up through the muck and the air pockets were never enough to get her flying again. Faye needed to explain that her depression that was erratic at best and insomnia as one of the worst, did not rule her life. Instead Faye waited for two weeks and each morning she would check her phone and say *if he comes to me when he gets back I’ll know*. Faye did not usually buy into such romantic ideas, but she had always wished for the naïve mind of her friends, wished to believe in flowers and teddy bears.

Faye kept herself busy at work at the museum and painting her raven eight more times and each time it was stronger but she saw her fear reflected in its charcoal eyes. “You got to stop looking at me you dumb bird.” Faye muttered.

Faye had gotten to the point of talking to her paintings which she swore was only what crazy painters did, yet here she was, bearing her insecurities to acrylic. Faye could not help herself, she knew Drew could have already landed, or was about to land, or his flight was delayed and she would never know. The anticipation of whether or not she would see him again was making her flesh feel wrong and her heart become disconnected. She would survive the breakup if he did not show, but her raven would not fly if her heart was broken, she did not want to lose her wings. Faye had never seen the world as clear as she did when she was flying in a Cessna 172 with Drew. The way the propeller moved at such a speed she could not see more than a blur in the sky when she looked at it. This was as close as Faye could imagine one could get

without growing a set of wings, and she had always longed for a set of her own wings, and the feeling of the ground, and the world hundreds of feet below her.

When Faye heard a knock at the door she screamed at Stella not to answer it and pushed her back onto their couch in order to reach the door first. She straightened her hair and choose to not dare looking out of the peep-hole, she could not remember if she had decided to order the Chinese or not. If it was not Drew she would feel such a disappointment it would surely spoil her Crab Rangoon's. Faye pulled the door open and felt herself shattering onto the linoleum floors, losing pieces under the couch and fridge.

Chapter Ten

Drew had wondered if the distance had caused her to delete his number and his face from her memory. He feared that she would not understand the need to process, how he viewed his time in the sky as his own, his haven, a place where problems got put on pause. He was ready to press play but he knew Faye and he knew she had a limit that once crossed she would not step back from. He could not screw up to that point, because he knew she would leave him and she would recover without a backwards glance. Drew felt his diaphragm restrict at the thought of the amount of whiskey and blackout nights in hotels with random girls from bars it would take to recover from losing Faye.

Drew closed his eyes while he gripped his steering wheel. He was a single flight of stairs away from her and he was molded to his car seat. He still did not know what to say to her, what he could say that would matter. All he wanted to do was look at her and see the depth of her eyes again, then hold onto her and never let her sink into her own eyes again. He wanted to anchor her pupils to his, her mental state to his strength. Drew wanted to give Faye part of his innocence in order for her to let go of her past, he just wanted to help her heal. He needed Faye to realize that to him what happened to her defined her as a strong survivor and he loved that about her.

Drew knew what he had to say and with the courage of a few deep breaths and one AC/DC song he plunged on forward thinking this is how it goes. His knock seemed to echo off the corridor walls and he felt his soul slipping into the cracks of the linoleum floors, seeping into a different realm where it could not feel pain that Faye could inflect on him.

Faye opened her door and he saw the bricks behind her irises and without knowing why or what about her bricks in her eyes had made him say, "Faye, forgive me?"

"Why?" Faye asked

Drew thought for a second and realized, at least in this moment, Faye deserved the truth and even though Drew hated putting words to the chaos in his mind, he knew she needed to hear how he felt about her. Drew knew if he refused to tell her all he felt she would close the door and it might take years for a single brick to fall and it pained him to think about how unhappy that would leave them both.

"I have not experienced half the trauma you have and yet you are the happier person." Drew began, "you glow Faye, so bright that even twenty-thousand feet up your soul is my beacon home. I've never had a lighthouse before and you are always lite for me and I love you. I love you and your light and how you seem

to think I deserve to have it shine on me. I am a candle to your jet engine and you ignite me. I am so sorry Faye that I did not react in a way you needed, and I know I should have called but I needed the time to figure out if I could do anything for you that wasn't just putting out your light."

Drew stopped and picked up Faye's limp hand and held it between his, he traced her fingers then kissed the top of them. Faye could almost see the strongest most important part of herself laying at their feet. Her mental forest of protection was decimated, simply because she knew Drew was speaking from his core. He loved her and needed her to understand him in a way he had failed to understand her, Drew needed Faye to act as the bigger person, again.

"Faye," Drew continued, "I know I can never fully understand what you told me, but I want to hold you while you tell me. I need to help you overcome your past however I can and if holding you and letting you tell me is all I can do for now, than I just want to do that for you. I love you. Everything that has happened to you..."

"Hush," Faye caressed Drew's face, "My turn to talk." Faye leaned in and pulled at his lips with hers. Faye kissed him with the passion of knowing she never wanted to see him unhappy and for now she knew she was his happiness. She memorized his lips and re-learned the language of his tongue. They stumbled back into Faye's apartment placing red ink across each other's back. Stella had made herself scarce several minutes prior, having the foresight of seeing how Faye's sweatshirt would fly right onto the part of the couch she had just laid on.

Drew pushed Faye back on her bed tracing the curve of her hips with his mouth, "thought you were going to talk to me."

"You are my happiness too."

Chapter Eleven

The asphalt burned Danny's soles as he rushed outside to get the mail, his college sweatpants dragged on the grass as he walked back to the front door. Danny was waiting for new subscription to Golf Digest to arrive, it was supposed to have a full story on Rory McIlroy and how he perfected his long game. Drew tossed the mail that did not contain his magazine, again, on the kitchen table for Abigail to go through later. Danny looked out his kitchen window and watched as Jill hung a hammock and started to read. It was moments in the peace of his silent house while looking at his family from the outside that Danny was content with his choices.

When Danny saw his family more as a finished still life rather than his day by day life he was able to feel happy. Danny stiffened as he heard Abigail's footfalls on the stairs heading towards him, He grabbed his iPhone and headphones from his drawer in the kitchen and headed out to the garage. Danny started up the John Deere riding mower and put his headphones in, he could not give up his weekends fully to his family. He worked five days a week sixty hours coming home with a decent income for an accountant with two kids and a wife to insure. Danny needed the solitude of at least lawn work to make him forget what his life had become, riding around on a mower was different than push mowing his parents lawn in childhood, but it was close.

Danny remembered comparing how much he would make mowing neighbors lawns with Louis' who lived in a slightly nicer neighborhood. Danny would always feel accomplished and proud if he was at least able to tie with Louis, not because Danny was petty or cared about money, it was more because Danny admired Louis that if he was able to make the same amount it meant he was as important as Louis was. What Danny never would know is how Louis always lied about how much he made knowing how hard Danny tried to tie things up with him. Louis just wanted to see Danny smile in complete ease knowing he too could do anything he set his mind too, his family did not hold him back, and Louis would look at Danny's life now and see the success he had achieved. Louis couldn't help but feel as if he helped get Danny to this point in life, that without his lies to Danny, Danny would not have had the strength to achieve all he did, or the perseverance.

Danny mowed his lawn for twenty minutes after the last uneven blade of grass fell in defeat amongst his decapitated brethren. Danny was pulling out his rake when his music paused and he looked

down at the screen to see a private number calling. He debated answering it thinking it was most often a telemarketer, but on the off chance that it was Louis calling Danny had to answer.

After accepting the charges Danny heard the voice he had waited weeks to hear, the voice that he went to bed each night remembering the pitch of. He saw the way Louis' mouth would curve in the way he said, "Danny... It's me."

Danny clasped the phone in his hand away from his face and he looked around making sure no one would overhear him in the garage. "Fuck you, Louis." Danny said. "You've let me go months without hearing from you."

"I thought you said I had to stop. Stop holding onto hope that you would realize the truth of yourself, stop bringing my endless love home to you. Stop pretending you had anything other than an old friendship to share with me."

"Louis, I did not say stop talking to me. How was I supposed to know you were safe? Then you had Samson call me; you know I hate him, and then he doesn't even let me talk to you."

"I asked him to call you Danny." Louis said. "I asked him to tell you what he did. He had no interest getting involved... in whatever you and I are. I told him not to let me talk to you, he isn't happy I am making this call either, he thinks you are bad for my state of mind. We are working on a really big case right now. Watching out for these two twenty year olds who witnessed something they shouldn't have. This case Danny, it is *the case*."

Danny knew what he was talking about, *the case* meant a case that in every U.S. Marshall's career had changed them. Danny figured it was working with such young kids, who were involved so high up, he felt for them. Danny also could read between the lines, this case was deadly, Louis might not walk out of it fully intact, or even dead.

"Are you going dark?"

"In a few weeks, Samson just went home to his family, boss told me to go home to mine as well. Then I realized my home, is you Danny, and it is burning it to the ground and I'd rather sleep on the streets with my dignity than spend another night in your guest room as your sometimes *lover* that you are ashamed of. I can't keep lying about us Danny it kills me, I love your family. I respect Abby too, she doesn't deserve this, I always told you not to drag her into this, and then you married her. If you were going to marry her and stay with her and have kids with her you should have broken things off with me, but you didn't."

“Louis. Stop please.” Danny was pacing until he saw Jill carrying her hammock towards the garage.
 “Louis, I can’t talk about this anymore.”

“Danny if you hang up on me, if you end this conversation I won’t try to salvage any part of our relationship.”

Danny smiled at Jill and took the hammock from her, “I’m on the phone with Uncle Louis, give us some privacy yea sweetie?” Jill went inside and closed the door behind her. “Louis what do you want from me that I can give you. I have given you all of that part of me I have to offer, I am sorry it doesn’t feel like enough anymore, but I don’t have more to give.”

“Then I just want you as my family as my friend. I don’t want be in love with you anymore. I want to date someone, Danny, and I want someone to give me everything.”

“When have I stopped you from doing that? When have I stopped you from moving on?”

“New Year’s ’05.”

Danny sucked a harsh breath of air in and deflated with the exhale. Louis was right, that was day that started off this odd arrangement, because Danny couldn’t handle at the time seeing Louis with another man. He had snapped and Danny did not have anything to say now in his own defense.

“See Danny,” Louis whispered, “you would hate it and I don’t have it in me to see you in pain.”

“What do you suggest then, if you won’t continue the way we are?”

“I can’t come home to you any longer. I think I will stay with Peter or Drew, maybe finally meet Faye if they are still a thing. I will not find happiness if I surround myself with you, I have to move on. You can’t call my work or Samson anymore. You have to let me go if I am going to move on. I am going to end up with someone Danny, you do realize that? I am not going to cause you pain by bringing them around but eventually when it gets time for him to meet the family, are you going to pull another stunt like New Year’s again? Or is this going to end everything for us, are you going to allow us to stop acting as a family just because you don’t accept yourself?”

Danny hissed, “I’m not gay Louis.”

“I take that as a yes, you are going to let your pride ruin the family.”

“No, goddammit Louis I’m not. If you say that distance for now is what you need then fine, the family is more important than what we call ourselves to each other.”

“I am going to move on.” Louis said.

“Sure, I know, but in the mean time you get your distance and when you can handle our arrangements with less feelings we can pick it back up right? You aren’t saying end it forever are you?”

“Danny, no more. I do mean forever, I can’t look at myself in the mirror knowing you can only love me behind locked doors. I can’t stomach the idea that the only love I deserve is secret and wrong. I cannot be your mistress for my whole life. I need someone to love me who is not ashamed of me, don’t you understand that at all?”

Danny closed his eyes and felt them prickle and he sat down on his mower again. He thought about what Louis was asking, he was giving him an ultimatum, leave Louis or leave his wife. Danny knew what he would say always has but forcing the vibrations from his mind into his voice box and out his mouth was as hard as swallowing a whole sea. Danny knew what he felt for Louis expanded across time and covered the world in an all-consuming light, it had since their first whiskey coated kiss, and the burn Louis tongue had left on the inside of Danny’s cheek.

“I can’t give you everything Louis, I can only offer what I have always offered and that is a home for when you are off of work. I can offer you myself fully in the spaces of freedom that I have from Abby and the kids. I cannot give you more, I don’t have more to give, and it would destroy me.”

“Then you are picking the lie over the truth. You are picking her over me, over your true family.”

“I can’t handle you moving on, I know you are right, so if you pick to leave our situation Louis, you are picking to discard our friendship, you are leaving me behind, not just us. I won’t handle your simple friendship without the other aspects, knowing you give them to someone else. I won’t share you Louis, you know that.”

“Then this is goodbye Danny, because it might have taken me until I was thirty-eight but I know I can do better than what you allow me to have. I can have happiness and love without you, and I will. You will regret choosing her over me Danny, you will.”

The line went dead and Danny felt hot tears slide off his chin onto his pant leg marking him with his mistake.

Chapter Twelve

The days that followed after Faye and Drew's reuniting, was with filled with half panted sentences, take out that never made it onto plates, and pajamas shed for hot naked skin and then back to flannel. It had started off as the best two weeks off for Drew since the beginning of his marriage with Monica, and had Faye calling into work twice, in order to enjoy the slips of hands.

Wednesday morning found Faye tucking in a pastel blue blouse into her pencil skirt and smiling as Drew played his flight simulator on his iPad. Faye loved how even at thirty-six Drew was still a child at heart and how flying and planes were to him what painting and art was to Faye. They were not the same person but they shared the same knowledge that they both lived their lives for their passions. Drew might not have understood art in the deep and emotional level Faye did, but he respected it, he knew what passion that strong was like and how you would bleed for it. Drew loved that Faye could share that similarity with him, Monica had never felt such deep appreciation and need for a single thing, like Faye and him did.

"Are you going to stay in my bed and play video games all day while I work hard to bring us home some food?"

"I mean I have two weeks off, you are welcome to join me in my glutton behavior, but you are not going to make me feel guilty." Drew laughed.

"I already called in the past two days, I have to go to work if I want to keep my job."

Faye rushed home excited to tell Drew all about the new shipment of mid-century oil portraits that got delivered that morning, just to find him missing. Faye knew the drop in her stomach was not because she was worried about where he could have gone but disappointment that he did not leave a note or text her. Faye had forgone lunch in order to come home a half hour early to see him. In this moment Faye had realized how much in the last two days they avoided talking, they avoided addressing the fact that Faye had only told Drew a tiny part of her past and he fled from her and went off the radar for two weeks, and they were avoiding the real world. Faye realized that even though she appreciated what Drew said to her, and how hearing Drew say 'I love you' for the first time was heart stopping, it was not enough to allow her to say it back.

Faye wasn't sure if what she felt for Drew was love, she knew she was feeling intense lust for Drew, their body chemistry kept them in bed for two days without thinking about their problems, instead thinking about the angles of their bodies, and the chemical makeup of his breathe on her shoulders. However, when it

came to saying I love you back to Drew, Faye always felt herself slipping into a different phrase. Faye did not want to say those words without tackling why he had run from her. She needed to know he was strong enough to handle the strength of her emotions, and if he could handle her, she was an ocean of love compared to his river. She would drown him if he was not trained and prepared for the onslaught of her thunderstorm. It scared Faye to think about the fact that Drew might still end up as an immature little boy in her eyes, because Faye knew that her raven was sad and could not fly because her raven was scared. Her raven, herself, her heart craved to love Drew, it wanted to feel the power of reciprocated love again, it had been so long.

Faye knew though the odds of Drew, a man who has a few pebbles of pain and trauma in comparison to her Grand Canyon of stones of pain, understanding her sorrow enough for her to let him in was unlikely. Faye sat on her unmade bed and stared at the ceases they had caused together. Faye simply wanted Drew to cut down her dark trees in her mind, and find the banks full of roses under her redwoods. Faye also feared, in a small secret pocket of her soul, that she might end up hurting Drew just in an effort to heal herself.

Drew found Faye sitting cross legged on her bed eyes closed and breathing through her nose an hour later. Drew stood staring at her wondering what had caused this meditation session, with the realization that he had forgotten to tell her he was living and thus he caused this. Drew needed to check on his place at home, collect his mail, and pay his bills. Two weeks is all it takes to form a habit and he had neglected to text her, in his habit of not answering to anyone. Drew dropped his bag silently on the floor and slide onto the bed next to her and whispered in her ear sweet little nothings hoping she would come back to him.

After a few lines Faye inhaled sharply and opened her eyes, had she not felt as centered as she did, she would have tackled him and cried asking him to never leave her so randomly again. Instead she smiled at him with sad eyes and realized they couldn't postpone the discussion any longer. Faye wanted was to curl up next to Drew and forget how scared at his absents she was. She wanted him to slide into her and forget how anxious this talk was making her. Faye did not want to leave Drew but Faye loved herself enough after years of putting her soul in toxic situations that she would pick herself over any other person without delay.

"We need to talk." Faye said. "Drew, these past two days have of course felt amazing, but we have avoided the real issues long enough. You left today and I freaked, and not because I don't trust you, because I do. I freaked because you just left me for two weeks without a word and I don't know when you leave without telling me if I am ever going to hear from you again."

“I just forgot Faye, I swear I didn’t mean to hurt you. I get used to not having to tell people where I am going during my two week on, and sometimes I forget to adjust back to normal.”

“I understand that, but after everything I would like to think you would act more careful around me, act as if you knew you could lose me at any second. Any wrong move, wrong word, could send me packing and I could spend two weeks ignoring you too.”

“You never did try to reach me after that first time either.”

“After the first time, which proves at least I tried once. You never did. Drew I bared the smallest part of my ripped up soul to you and you leave without a word, how do you expect that to make me feel?”

“I love you...”

Faye interrupts him, “No more of that, I love you doesn’t matter to me, I don’t know what that means. I have had way too many people look at me and scream they love me in every language they know and yet they tried to destroy me. Love Drew is not all forgiving, you can’t expect me to forgive you just because you realized you value me. I always valued you and I don’t need love in order to treat you fair.”

Drew looked at Faye’s cream bedroom walls and in them he saw the future he could paint on them. He saw Faye and himself flying and her learning to fly and acting as his co-pilot. Drew saw her painting and showing him new art and explaining with the spark in her eyes telling him that he didn’t need to understand anything she was saying he just had to listen. Drew wanted to listen, he wanted her to allow him to listen for many more months. He saw Faye as entering his family and while staring at that blank cream wall realized she did not see that because she was suffering and in her Zen and her bravery he failed to notice it. Faye started blankly at Drew waiting for him to either push her away or pull her to him.

“I want you to forgive me because I deserve a second chance. You blindsided me with what you said, I look at you Faye and I see that there are some stories that stay looked in a vault in the dusty part of your mind. I did not know you trusted me enough for any of those stories and I know I did not react with tact or with love, but I have no training for pain or trauma. The worse thing to happen to me was learning my parents were mediocre people who didn’t really care for me. I divorced my wife because we were compatible but we still remained family, friends. I have no backbone for pain, but I can admit that. I want you to look at me and realize you are not ruining me with your pain. I will handle it from now on. I will handle you and hold you and love you, I will love you so deeply that you will never doubt again that I do not feel as if your pain is mine, that your trauma is my burden to carry too.”

“That is just it Drew,” Faye interrupted, “I don’t want you to shoulder this burden with me. I don’t want to affect you with it. I don’t want you to lose sleep over it, I want you to listen and to understand and you can’t because you are right you are not damaged, and I have no right to wish you were, just so you would understand better. I would never forgive myself if the worse thing to happen to you was my past.”

“If that is the worst thing to happen to me Faye, I will plead for it.”

“No! Don’t you see, if I am the worst thing to happen to you, if things that I had no control over and I tell you about effect you to a level that you have never felt before, then we would should end things now, because who am I to do that to anyone? Who am I to take your ignorance away from you?”

“Faye, someone has to do it, why not you?”

“I am a disaster, I’m a hurricane and I am going to take you with me to despair if you let me.”

“All I see within your storm filled eyes, is a beautiful dawn breaking over the green horizon. I just want to break down your brick walls, and if that means you drown me in the process, I will just learn to breathe underwater with you.”

Drew watched as Faye did nothing in much detail but sit across from him, cross legged holding the universe in place with her breath and Drew knew in that moment how the old story would go, of how he found his soul mate at thirty-six and how he feared her in that moment more than any God, for she had the power to banish him, and in that moment he would know true pain, and he would forever wear the burn of her love across his chest with pride.

“What if you break me apart?” Faye asked, “I am not holding myself together with much more than duct tape and safety pins.”

“Oh Faye, but you know how to heal and survive with pieces missing. What will I do, when my love for you flutters away in the wind and I can’t find an intact piece of me? What will I do if you leave me?”

Faye caught a sob in her throat and squeezed the tears out silently, “you make it sound as if we are going to destroy each other.”

“I think we could.” Drew replied, “We could also build into each other and become stronger for it. I can hold up your ceiling so you can lose those brick walls,”

“And I can blow the wind into the propellers and make you fly.” Fay continued.

“You would allow me to soar.”

Chapter Thirteen

Drew made his way to the HopCat bar in downtown Grand Rapids. Louis had called Drew a few days ago to tell him about his week back home before he had to going off the radar for a while, Louis had asked Drew if he could crash at his place for the week so he could visit everyone. When Drew had asked why he didn't stay with Danny like usual Louis just replied that he and Danny had a falling out over some life views. Drew couldn't help how he wondered as he walked toward the bar, if it was about Faye and himself, he knew that Danny and himself haven't talked much either because of his relationship. In fact even Peter was acting distant these days, their biweekly phone calls haven't happened in over two months and he wondered why Peter was acting odd as well, he wondered if it was because he had left Danny's before Peter arrived?

Drew saw Louis sitting at the bar with a tall Two Hearted beer on his right and two empty shot glasses face down to his left. Louis had struggled with a mild drinking problem since he was sixteen. Louis came from a family where living in Marshall was because it was the best they could do, and even then his parents had hyperextended themselves in order to provide for him. It did not help that Louis' father, grandfather, and Uncle had all died from alcoholism, or the side effects of it. Louis' father had gone in a drunk driving incidence, his car wrapped itself around an oak tree during a clear Monday afternoon. Louis' father had a BIC four times the legal amount, they had a closed casket wedding and Louis' at fourteen held his sobbing mother vowing to never drink.

Then at sixteen Louis' lost his grandfather to liver failure and two months later his Uncle to suicide. Louis saw his mother crumbling to support him and herself and he felt the pressures of failing. Louis did not reach for a drink until two weeks before his seventieth birthday. He was sitting on the bank of the river a few miles behind his house thinking about the past few years, how much death he had seen, and how jaded it made him feel.

Danny had found him a few hours after his mother called around asking if anyone had seen him. It was nine at night when Danny sat next to him holding out a pack of Louis' favorite cigarettes. "Have one it will calm you down." Danny said.

Louis grabbed for one and put it between his lips, Louis leaned forward and cupped his hands around Danny's who was holding out a match for him. "I think I am going to go into the police force, or something."

Danny was confused at the subject choice but figured Louis had a point behind it. "Okay, why?"

“I think I could handle it. I mean killing wouldn’t bother me if I was forced to, and saving people would give me purpose. Upholding the laws and not letting drunks drive and kill themselves would be a bonus.”

Danny realized Louis was projecting all the pain from the past few years into this conversation. Danny had watched Louis for the last year waiting for him to break down, waiting for Louis to shed even a single tear. Louis had not cried at any of the funerals, he had not cried when his mother talked about moving away to a trailer park, something she could afford. The lack of emotion that Danny had seen from Louis was concerning and he had walked several nights a week over to Louis’ house to lay next to him in bed and hold his hand in the silence. Danny could feel the engulfing pain Louis was going through, it would crash into him in tidal waves and Danny just wanted to act as the rock that Louis could hold onto so he did not get swept away with the current.

“I think you would make a great cop.” Danny began, “I think though you are smart enough to go into the FBI or something, don’t you think?”

“Maybe, that would take a lot of college though right, I know Mom can’t afford to send me, and if I leave who will help her with bills? I mean I work so I can help out, if I leave what will she do?” Louis asked.

Danny grabbed onto Louis’ hand, it was the first time outside of Louis’ bedroom that they held hands and Louis squeezed and Danny squeezed back. Danny was trying to tell him that life would end up okay for both of them, that he wouldn’t let Louis have a bad life, a sad life. Danny would always take care of him and make sure he succeeded.

“Louis, your mom will be fine, you know she will. Maybe she can live with her sister? They get along right, I mean she comes over every couple of weeks, and she could just live with her until she had enough money for a place or something?”

“I can’t leave her, not like Dad did.” Louis replied.

“You can’t give up on your life for her either. If you go to college you can get a great job and after a few years maybe you can earn enough to take care of her again, you can buy her a cute house and support her if that is what you want to do. You can’t help her much with minimum wage, or joining the police force here. You always wanted to get out of Marshall, out of Michigan. Your mom would want you to leave, she would feel so proud of you.”

Louis muttered a response and Danny pulled at his hand silently asking him to look at him. Danny did not have to say anything, never did with Louis. Their friends would make fun of them, saying they had a secret language. Danny thought they did, he could look right at Louis and know what he was feeling and Louis could look at Danny and feel grounded. This time though Danny saw turmoil in Louis' eyes but also something like indecision and Danny felt confused, he did not understand what was making Louis feel like that. Louis saw the questions in Danny's eyes and he made up his mind, and plunged into the action of embracing Danny. Danny hugged Louis back with all the strength that he had and when he felt Louis pull away he was surprised when Louis did not go more than a few inches back. Louis grabbed Danny's face and with one last deep exhale Louis planted his lips on Danny's.

Danny was shocked at first not by the action itself more because of the way his stomach flipped and the way he felt as if he would never need to breathe again. His chest felt like it was expanding to fast and he felt himself lifting off the ground. Danny needed to grab onto something solid and his fist clenched around Louis's arms and Louis froze with his tongue inside Danny's mouth for a half of a second before he pushed Danny backwards on the ground. Louis straddled Danny and Danny moaned into Louis's mouth.

Danny was electrocuted into reality when he felt Louis's hips grind into his own. He was not gay he knew that, he was dating Abigail and he did not ask for this to happen. He pushed Louis off of him and wiped his mouth of with a sound of revulsion. Louis was panting next to him with a flush on his cheeks that Danny refused to think about. Danny begged himself to calm down and rationalize what had just happened.

"Louis I know you have had a lot of things happen to you the past few years, I realize that me acting as your best friend, your shoulder to cry on might have confused you, but Louis I am not *gay* and neither are you."

Louis did not respond he just looked on at Danny with hunger clearly etched into his face. "Louis, I am going to forget this happened, but that means you have to too. Gay is a choice, remember the pastor told us that several times. You don't want to have the whole town treat you like an outcast, remember what happened to Ben last year when he was found kissing other guys? His whole family had to move away. Do you really want that to happen to you, your mother? Hasn't she experienced enough? I won't ever talk to the guys about this but it can't happen again, with me, and with anyone else. You got to get your head straight okay? You can't be a freak Louis, no one will hire you, and no one wants a fag to work for them. You know that."

“What if I actually am gay Danny,” Louis replied. “What if I don’t want to change who I am, what if I was born this way, what if I have always loved you?”

Danny loved Louis too, always had and Danny knew that he had enjoyed the kiss and the way Louis’s sturdy built body had felt on top of him, but Danny knew what was right and knew that Louis would not have the life he needed if he let him act on these feelings.

“No, Louis you can’t not in this town, not now. Get your head straight get out of Michigan, I know you can do better.”

“I love you Danny, doesn’t that mean anything to you?” Louis pleaded.

“No.”

Louis sobbed, “Why would you come to me and hold me then? The past year you have held me! You cannot tell me that meant nothing.”

“I was acting as your friend.”

“Friends don’t do that,” Louis replied. “You love me Danny the same way I love you I know you do, don’t lie to me, please Danny don’t lie to me. I need you to tell me you feel this too. We don’t have to tell anyone, just tell me you love me.”

In the years that followed this moment Danny knew he said the right thing, not for himself but for Louis. He said what would turn Louis into the driven man he needed to become to get himself out of this town, and if that helped lead Louis to the bottle then Danny would watch out for him. Danny would take Louis drinking over him not living his true life.

“I don’t love you Louis, I find this part of you disgusting and I was just confused by your actions. I didn’t want you to touch me like that. Had I known about this part of you I would have never even held your hand or hugged you, I would never be okay with this. Louis if you ever touch me like that again I will not hesitate to tell everyone we know that you are a fucking queer.”

Louis voice shook, “You are lying I can tell, you always look down when you are lying. Tell me you don’t want me, that you don’t love me. Look at me and tell me without wavering that you didn’t enjoy that kiss.”

Danny steeled himself, “I hated the kiss, I hate this part of you. I would rather have you turn into an alcoholic like your father than be a queer.”

Drew sat on the stool next to Louis and took the half empty beer from him and starting drinking it. "You don't get to order another, or anything else alcoholic okay?"

Louis just nodded and stared down at the grains in the wooden bar top. Louis wanted to tell Drew about Danny and him, about their past. How for the past eleven years he has had an affair with Danny, how he was gay and mostly how unhappy he was. Instead Louis just asked Drew about Faye and told him he was just glad he was finally happy again, which he was. Drew and Monica had sapped the life out of each other non-stop for years. They both needed to find happiness with different, better for them people.

"I would love to meet her, today would work. You have a few more days off right?" Louis asked.

"How about we sober you up and have dinner with her tomorrow?" Drew said. "She makes a mean three meat lasagna, you'll love it."

"I am not surprised that you are dating someone so young, Monica always did call you young at heart." Louis laughed.

"I think she called me immature actually." Drew replied.

"I just made her sound nice, but it is true."

"How many drinks did you have before I showed up?" Drew asked.

Louis just shrugged then burped. "Maybe a couple... too many, I texted you after the fourth shot and I think my third beer, that is the last I counted."

"Okay man let's get you back to my place yea?"

Drew hated seeing Louis drunk it reminded him off everything Louis went through in high school and how party happy Louis become his first two years of college. Louis had finally sobered up when his mother sat him down the beginning of his junior year and told him it would kill her to see him end up like his father. Now Drew only saw him touch anything alcoholic at weddings, deaths, births, and when he fought with Danny, always when he fought with Danny.

"I screwed up Drew, I should have never trusted Danny. Samson warned me this would happen and look at me now, a drunk just like my dad."

"Hey come on man you are not a drunk and you aren't your dad. You'll sleep it off and we can figure out what is going on with you and Danny in the morning."

"Sure Drew, okay."

Chapter Fourteen

Drew half dragged half carried Louis up to his second floor apartment. Drew leaned Louis against the wall as he stuck his key into the door, to Drew's surprise he found the door unlocked. The irony of the one time someone breaks into his place, was the one time Louis, the perfect person to help, was out of commission. Drew told Louis to stay where he was and Louis was far too dizzy to chance walking on his own. Drew pushed the door open just wide enough to slide through, he noticed how all of the lights were on in the kitchen. Drew grabbed the only weapon-esque item in eyesight and gripped the handle of the broom as if it was a baseball bat. Drew approached the kitchen and as he turned the corner Faye screamed.

"What are you doing here?" Drew asked

"I'm cooking for you." Faye replied with a slight question in her voice. "Even if I was a burglar were you planning on beating me with that? It's hollow and plastic I don't think it would persuade me."

Drew flipped Faye off and she laughed. Drew asked what she was doing cooking for him. He had told her that day about postponing dinner until tomorrow and Faye said that she had already had the lasagna started before he called her.

"Well, I don't know how attentive Louis will end up." Faye asked why. "I left him in the hall, he is college frat party day two drunk. No longer funny just nauseous."

"Oh does this have to do with him and your friend Danny, didn't you say they got into a fight?"

Drew nodded and excused himself in order to fetch Louis, a man who was at the end of the hallway puking into a fake potted fern. Drew waited for Louis to finish before he walked up to Louis and helped him to the couch in the living room. Faye washed her hands and brought Louis a glass of water, he looked up at her and realized how big of a failure he must look like to Faye.

"I swear I am not in habit of meeting new people this messed up" Louis began, "well okay some people, but I don't usually care about their sober opinion of me, if you know what I mean." Louis winked.

Faye just smiled and asked him to drink the water, which he did in four giant gulps, after which he turned back to Faye intent on questioning her. Instead Faye stood up and got Louis another glass of water and a dinner roll. After Louis had finished the food Faye handed him three aspirin. Louis even in his mental state was able to see the pain in Faye's eyes, the same version of pain he saw in the girl he was about to start protecting, and the same pain he saw in his own eyes. Louis reached out for Faye and caressed her limp left wrist in his calloused hands. Faye turned to face Louis on the brown corduroy couch they were sharing, and

she watched and Louis traced a few of the scars that lined her wrist. With most people Faye would have snatched her arm back at the first touch from them, however Faye had seen the truth behind Louis's eyes. Louis she knew was like her, hiding and all he needed was understanding.

"You are very kind Faye." Louis spoke in hushed tones. Drew was changing out of his clothes and making the guest bed for Louis.

"Thank you. I just want you to know that Drew is really happy to have you here, and I am much honored to meet you, Louis." Faye replied

Louis continued to trace her wrist while looking directly in her eyes into her dark corners of her mind. Drew found them sitting like that a few minutes later and noticed the few fallen tears on Faye's cheek and chin. Louis himself did not look much better the tears had not left his eyelids, yet. Drew cleared his throat not liking how Louis was holding onto Faye, Drew felt his stomach drop and the startled jump they both did at his noise.

"Your room is ready for you Louis, I'll help you to it."

Faye made herself busy covering the lasagna for tomorrow and washing the few dishes she had used. When Drew was finally done putting Louis to bed Faye was undressing in Drew's room. Drew closed his door and watched her for a moment as she dropped her jeans and pulled off her green strappy blouse. Faye had put her hair into a messy bun on the top of her head, making the loose strands fall like tree roots around her neck. Drew knew that Faye loved him even if she had still yet to say it to him, but it was moments in the dim haze of his lamp, with the clothes half off and Faye looking all human and real in a way most women failed at, Drew couldn't help but wonder what she was doing with him.

Faye turned and smirked at Drew, "Watching me undress, you dirty old man."

Any other day Drew would have laughed and played into the game, this night his ego was bruised and he snapped instead. "Really Faye, my best friend is a wreck in the next room and you prance yourself in front of me, as if I would want to sleep with you right now."

Drew knew his mistake by the way Faye's body language changed, her arms came to wrap around her stomach, her knees turned in towards themselves, and Faye's back hunched just an inch. Drew realized she looked like she was ready to take hit verbal or physical, his voice caught in his throat, and when he reached out to Faye trying to calm her and apologize he felt his heart splinter at how she flinched.

"Faye, no." Drew whispered. "I didn't mean to yell, I'm just frustrated."

“I’m just going to get dressed now, is that okay, I just feel very exposed at the moment.”

“Faye, you don’t have to ask for permission, please get dressed in anything you want if it makes you feel better.” Drew dropped his head into his hands and wanted to scream, and would have had he thought it would not have scared Faye. Instead he inhaled through his fingers and then exhaled, when Drew looked up Faye was clothed and sitting on his bed.

“I do not approve of how you talked to me, and I feel strange but you have made it clear that a lot of emotions are flowing inside your intellectual brain, so I’m going to stay and help you sort out what you feel.” Faye patted the bed next to her and Drew asked if he could lay down in his boxers. Thankfully Faye laughed while saying of course.

Drew did not know what Faye expected him to talk about, or what he was even wanting to talk about either. Faye didn’t start by asking anything, instead she just laid down and prompted him to lay down with her. Faye’s shoulder pressed against Drew’s and she interwove their hands and feet, connecting them by touch and heat.

“When you are ready just say the first thing that comes to your mind.” Faye told Drew.

After a few minutes of just laying side by side Drew wondered what she thought was bothering him. Drew started wondering again at why Louis was holding Faye’s arm and why she was crying. Drew knew he had not been gone more than a few minutes but it was he realized enough for Louis to make a move on Faye, it was enough for Faye to tell Louis how unhappy she was. Drew felt Faye squeeze his hand twice in a row and realized his whole body was tense. Drew tried to relax limb by limb but once he reached his neck he blurted out a question.

“Why didn’t you flinch when Louis leaned into you when you handed him water?”

Faye was a tad surprised at that question, she had not realized Drew had noticed her aversion to touch. “What do you mean?”

“Faye you know what I mean, you always tense up when people get close to you, and if they touch you whether or not you see it coming you pull away. So tell me why was Louis the first person I’ve ever seen touch you without you freaking out. You jumped when I first touched your shoulder and you almost jumped out of your skin when I touched your knee.”

“Drew,” Faye began, “It isn’t what you think.”

“He was touching your scars! You don’t even like me looking at them, you’d never let me rub them in the way you let Louis.”

Faye forced herself to remain where she was, she wanted to help Drew figure out his feelings and if this was step one, him attacking her she would handle it. Plus Faye knew it was a fair enough question.

“I’m not going to explain this more than once, so listen up. Louis understands the darkness, Drew.” Faye hushed Drew’s interruption before she continued. “Drew, he is not happy, Louis is going through a dark time, and he has in him a memory or memories that poison us to the outside world. This memory Drew is enough to send people into chronic depression and cause a wide range of mental disorders. Louis has that same darkness I have and we can see it in each other. I let him touch me Drew because I knew he needed to, he needed to feel the skin of someone else who has felt what he is feeling, someone who has not let the darkness kill them. He needed to feel hope, and I did not flinch because in that moment I knew he could not hurt me more than I could hurt him, and in that moment I swear we were connected.”

Faye heard how raspy her voice was getting and she cleared her throat, “I let him feel my past so he would know we were similar and I let him hold onto so he wouldn’t fall apart. Louis and I are kindred souls that is it.”

Drew huffed and tried to let go of Faye’s hand and Faye just held on tighter. Drew sat in silence his hand limp around her maniacal, he thought over what she had said and wondered why she had not felt the same kindred soul in him.

“Why do you have this connection with him, a man you have never met before, but not with me?” Drew asked.

Faye turned towards Drew and leaned her head against his, “He knows pain in a way I hope you never have to. Louis and I know pain by a first name basis, but we would never say it in fear of it finally overwhelming us and claiming us.”

“You sound like you are talking in riddles, or poetry. I don’t get how Louis is more what *damaged* than me?”

“I shouldn’t have to explain this to you, Drew. Plus I wouldn’t call him damaged that’s rude. Like me Drew, the past has left a brand on Louis and I’m surprised you don’t see it, why do you think he drinks, he is troubled, he is struggling, and he has had something life changing happen to him.”

Faye let go off Drew's hand and rolled off the bed. Drew noticed her put on her jacket and then her socks. Drew knew he should ask her not to leave, tell her again how sorry he was, but Drew wouldn't he was able to not yet. Drew was not practiced enough in the body language of those with the darkness, Drew did not know how important it was for him to ask her to stay. Instead as Faye pulled on her left shoe and stood to leave Drew said that if she left now she would just look guilty of something.

Faye bristled at the comment, "why don't you ask Louis in the morning about his heartbreak. I'm sure it will shed light on a lot of past memories, and when it does don't bother calling me."

Faye slammed his bedroom door closed and then again the front door. She drove home not shedding a tear and realizing that the pure aura she always felt Drew had might to turn out as enough to make her stay. Faye loved how Drew had lived a pain free life, for most parts, but in this moment she wondered if experience life changing trauma made her into a person that *undamaged* people would never understand. Drew likewise was thinking about Faye and her past, he wondered what she went through that linked her with Louis? Then he wondered about the comment at the end, was Louis going through a breakup, Drew didn't think Louis would keep that quiet.

Drew closed his eyes and pictured Faye lying next to him and him tracing her scars with his mouth. He would kiss away her pain and she would cry and tell him how much his kindness meant to her, she would tell him what happened and it would not change anything, it would make them unbreakable and she would heal, he would heal her. Drew knew that if Faye just let him he could put her back together and if it took listening to some stories of lost friendships and bad parenting he knew he could handle it with pose and grace, and all he needed was for Faye to open up to him and let him in.

Chapter Fifteen

Louis woke up without a hangover but with a desperate need to go the bathroom. As Louis stands up he realizes that he is not in the spare bedroom at Danny's rather he is at Drew's and Louis feels as if he swallowed a hotels worth of regret. Had he not spoken out about the way Danny's and his relationship was and how he wanted more, Louis knew he could have woken up at Danny's, alone still but at least close to Danny. Louis grabbed at his hair and shook his head back and forth, vowing to stop thinking he was worth anything less than becoming someone's number one person.

Louis made his way into the kitchen after a quick shower and rummaged through the pantry looking for anything edible, knowing Drew's habits when he was off of work. To Louis's surprise he found a stocked pantry and even fresh milk and eggs in the fridge. Louis figured it was Faye's doing and smiled while making omelets for himself and Drew. As Louis was finishing Drew wandered over to the coffee maker and poured himself a mug. Louis could tell that Drew had not slept well and he smirked.

"Faye to embarrassed to come out looking as haggard as you?" Drew gave Louis a questioning look. "Dude it's cool that you had crazy sex with your twenty year old girlfriend all night, more power to you."

"She's not here, she left last night, and no I do not want to talk about it."

Louis handed over an omelet to Drew and they talked about Louis's upcoming job instead of talking about their problems, like they always had growing up. Louis told Drew how Samson and he were going to watching over two kids, a nineteen year old girl and her drug dealer boyfriend who was only twenty one. Louis explained how saving this lower level drug dealers life and his girlfriend meant that the drug dealer would testify against some of the Cartel and even if they did not get a lot of the Cartel at least they got a few, and they would get the kid and his girlfriend off the streets.

"Maybe if they stay with witness protection long enough it will give them a full new life. They aren't bad kids, just had hard lives, and I think that we can give them a way to have the kind of lives they never thought they could have."

Louis then went on to explain how he would have to spend a few months at least seeing them through trial, and a few more helping them set up a new life wherever they get placed.

"What I hear you saying is you are going to miss yet another family Christmas? You know how irritated Danny gets when we don't all show, always talks about tradition and how if he don't have a few we would never see each other."

Drew saw how Louis tried to smile but couldn't force his mouth to really turn into anything other than a grimace. Drew was about to ask what was going on between them two, but then he remembered what Faye had said.

"So what was the deal with you and Faye last night?" Drew asked.

"Ah, I wondered when you would ask me about that." Louis held out his hands and laughed. "Cool it man, she just is similar to me, we sees...like spirits in each other I guess. I don't actually remember a lot of last night. I just remember her being very kind to me, so good job falling for a nice girl."

"You were tracing her scars." Drew accused. "She never lets me touch them on purpose, she says it makes her feel ashamed, but yet I walk out here and see you groping her and all she has to say about it is the same bullshit about kindred spirits or souls or whatever."

Louis realized that Faye had left because Drew thought something was going on between them. It was moments that threatened to ruin his friendships that Louis wished he could come out to Drew, or any of his family. As Louis watched Drew, he grew more and more upset, he could see Drew thinking about all the secret meanings behind Faye's and his connection, and he just wanted Drew to know that he had nothing to worry about.

"Drew, I know you think it is something insidious but really it is simple, she did not fear my judgement because I am not better or worse than her, I cannot judge Faye because I am equal to Faye in demons."

"She called it the darkness," Drew said, "and that you both share the same kind of darkness."

"The darkness I like that, it is poetic." Louis responded. "Drew please don't worry about last night, and if that is why Faye isn't hear you really should call and apologize."

"She said I can't. Well actually she told me to ask about your heartbreak and then not to bother with calling her."

Louis tensed up but was not surprised Faye was able to hone in on his problem, just like Louis was able to tell Faye's. Louis grabbed up the plates and mugs and started to hand wash them as an effort to change the subject. Drew however was surprised that Louis was trying to avoid the subject.

"Well Louis?" Drew waited for a response and when none came he asked, "Who was she?"

Louis laughed a bitter brittle laugh, "Who was he...Drew it is always him."

Several moments of a tense silence passed before Drew sighed out a sad *shit*. Drew had realized that somehow Faye had known that Louis was not interested in her at the least, and maybe she even knew he was gay. Drew knew that his call would get sent to voicemail and any text sent would go unread. Still he knew that she needed to know that at least he was willing to try. Drew turned away from Louis, but did not leave the kitchen, Drew did not want Louis to think that he judged him. Drew left a short voicemail calling himself dumb and asking for her to please come to dinner and then he texted her the same message. When Drew was done he turned towards Louis and said the only thing he thought would help.

“My co-pilot all last month was gay, kept trying to get me to join the mile high club with him. When I told him I had done that long ago, with Monica...and more recent with Faye, he just laughed and said it is different from the back.”

To Drew’s relief Louis let out a barking laugh and Louis pushed at his shoulder. “Drew you are the dumbest man on Earth.” Louis then grabbed Drew into a full body hug. “Thank you, for acting dumb.”

Drew realized, while Louis was patting his back and then clearing his throat as he pushed away from the embrace, that he had always known. Louis had never brought girls around and he was the best looking of the group. Louis had never talked about marriage or kids, in fact Louis never talked about relationships or anything in that spectrum. At the same moment that Louis turned back to the dishes Drew felt the final piece click into place. Louis had objected to Danny marrying Abigail.

“You are staying with me because of Danny... You love him.”

Louis did not turn around and he did not have to, the fall of his shoulders was enough for Drew. “He loves you too doesn’t he?” Drew waited and still no response came. “Louis are you having an affair with Danny?”

“I was. I ended it, I wanted more and I hated myself for hurting Abby, and I couldn’t go on thinking I was only good enough for closed doors and hidden love.”

“How long has this happened for? Was it only Danny, or is he just the newest?” Drew asked.

“I have only loved Danny and for eleven years I let him love me.”

“Why? Why not just find someone else?”

“There was never anyone else for me. Danny is the eye of my storm. Danny has always held my love, all of it, and only him. I can’t explain it Drew, but it has only ever been Danny.”

Chapter Sixteen

Faye was slapping different stages of mixed orange all over her newest raven canvases. Lucy stood to the side watching with apprehension as Faye whipped out her anger. Faye had called Lucy on her drive home last night and Lucy had spent the night on her side of Faye's bed as they ate popcorn mixed with peanut m&m's and watched days' worth of Grey's Anatomy. However, it was going on noon and usually Faye did not let the same emotional problem bother her two days in a row.

Lucy knew better though than try to interrupt Faye as she painted, she had learned that lesson freshman year when Faye ruined Lucy's favorite dress. Lucy was getting ready for a date in the dorm room they shared and Faye was painting in her corner, something abstract for class. Lucy kept trying to ask Faye for opinions on how she should wear her hair, but Faye was not listening, she was in what Lucy and Stella call color cube. The only way to enter Faye's color cube was to pull her away from the painting and risk getting the backlash of the color cube all over you, which is what happened to Lucy over four years ago.

Instead Lucy just ate some light lunch and watched for Faye's tells that she was about to break out of the color cube by herself. First the land holding the paint pallet will start to shake, then she will dap her paintbrush in the wrong color; which Faye won't notice until she does it three more times. Finally, Faye will exit the color cube when her arms finally fail her, usually paint gets everywhere, and if it happens in the apartment Faye doesn't get the security deposit back.

The color cube had only happened a few times every year but they tended to last anywhere from two hours to three days. This time Lucy woke up at nine and noticed Faye was missing and so was her smock. By the look of the canvas Faye had starting working at least at five at the latest. Lucy knew that Faye was going to snap soon, this event with Drew was not enough to send her fully into the color cube, but it was enough for bags to have etched themselves under her eyes. Faye's hair was piled haphazardly on the top of her head and if Lucy was honest with herself, Faye had started to fall apart weeks ago when Drew originally went missing. This color cube episode was not unexpected or sudden, it was building for weeks, and it just took this single jealousy spike confrontation to seal Faye into her color cube.

Lucy turned and went to scrap the rest of her hummus into the trash when she heard a light knock on the door. Lucy turned to Faye and Faye did not even bat an eye, Lucy whipping her hands off on the back of her jeans went to answer the door.

To Lucy's surprise it was a broad chested man who was not Drew standing at the door looking every ounce as confused as Lucy felt. "Hi, doesn't Faye live here? I'm Louis and I think I owe her an apology."

Lucy smiled at the name and opened the door wider for him to enter, "she's in her color cube right now, I don't know exactly when she will reenter the real world, but by the way she is slouching I'm thinking at least in the next hour."

"Color cube?" Louis asked.

Lucy explained all about Faye's color cube and how it was her coping mechanism and Louis understood the need to escape into one's own mind, it was the only true place no one but yourself could harm. Louis watched as Faye just kept piling more and more orange paint onto the canvas, when he asked about the rhythmic color choice Lucy just said that sometimes it was an image Faye would paint over and over again, and other times a shape, or a color.

"Faye once said color was emotional based while images were thoughts or memories. I'm not sure about shapes, I'm sure she has a reason for everything she does, I mean Faye is a little odd but she knows the reason behind every erratic behavior she has. Faye says that is what separates her from lunatics; the fact that she knows what she is doing is irrational."

Louis laughed, "Yet she still does it?"

"Don't dis something until you try it and never shun a routine that works." Faye responded while walking over to the sink. She washed off her few paintbrushes before turning around. "Thanks Lucy I'm good now." Lucy just shrugged the thanks off.

Faye asked what Louis was doing at her place and when he explained how bad he felt that he was the reason behind Faye and Drew's fight Faye slapped the counter and hissed out, "don't you dare let Drew make you think this is your fault."

"No. No. He didn't, it isn't like that at all. I didn't come over only to apologize I also came to say thank you." Louis replied and at Faye's confused frown he continued. "Drew and I finally had a brother talk that we had put off for years and because apparently you had a feisty parting line or two last night, it made him start thinking about a few things, things about me, and things about me and men."

Realization dawned on both Faye's and Lucy's faces at once, they looked at each other and without saying a word Lucy gave Faye a firm hug, kiss on the cheek, and told Louis it was great to meet him. Faye offered to make Louis a drink and while making his coffee she thought about what it meant that Louis was

here instead of Drew. Faye knew she told Drew not to contact her, she wondered if Drew sent Louis in his place, and if he did what did that mean for their relationship? Faye wondered if she was going to have to make the first move with Drew again.

“I can see your brain churning over everything, you can ask me questions if you want, and it can center around Drew if that is what you need.” Louis offered.

Faye sighed, “I don’t even know what I want to allow myself to ask.”

“Do you always second guess yourself like this?”

Faye in fact did, at least she started to after she found out that her first and second long term boyfriends had cheated on her. Faye had found all of that out months after each break up and had always wondered what it was about her that made it so she couldn’t notice a cheater, from then on Faye had the habit of second guessing every thought she had. Faye luckily did not have trust issues with men, rather Faye had issues with trusting herself, and what her gut would tell her as she laid under her purple covers.

“Why are you here and I want the real reason, not some pretty lie about saying sorry and thank you?”

Louis accepted his mug and traced the rim with this index finger while he stared at Faye. Faye was not aware of it but Louis was profiling her. Louis knew she had got maybe two hours of sleep and had a mild hangover. More than that though Louis could tell she was tough and she would have no problem surviving a breakup with Drew, she in fact would leave him in pieces and walk over them without a backwards glance. Louis knew it was not because Faye was a horrible person, rather it was because she was hard and fortified. Faye was a survivor.

“I want to know what you think you can gain from Drew.”

Faye was shocked at how blunt Louis came off, then at the same time Faye knew his day job and also had read him correctly the night before. Faye was not afraid of Louis or his questions she knew it would not change anything between Drew and herself, that wasn’t why Louis was asking. Louis was asking because he was not sure yet if he should support their relationship.

“I think I can gain happiness.” Faye responds and it is true. In the dusty corners of Faye’s battered psyche all she craves is to be loved.

Louis did not respond instead took a sip from his coffee and stared at Faye for a few more moments. Faye met her stare with her own and inside all she could picture was Louis telling her that Drew wasn’t interested in making her happy anymore, or maybe that he didn’t think she could make Drew happy.

“Are you sure Drew can make you happy?” Louis asked with a soft lilt to his voice. “Drew has not seen half of what has made your eyes so deep and haunted, I bet you haven’t even trusted him enough to tell him the nightmare parts, and so I ask you again what do you think you can gain from Drew, because I don’t think happiness is enough, you want something deeper than that.”

Faye shrugged and stared down at her paint crusted hands. Louis was not wrong it was not only happiness that Faye wanted from Drew, it was just all she was positive he could give her, at least for a little while. What Faye wanted was silent understanding, she wanted Drew to know all of her demons and not try to battle them back like others had before, and not hide from them either, all Faye wanted was for him to hold her hand as she held debates with her demons. Faye wanted Drew not to know what her mind felt like but to wish that she herself did not know her pain and at the same time love the fact that her demons had made her into this unbreakable woman. Faye sipped her own coffee and cleared her throat as she placed the mug softly down and while staring at the giant redwoods on its side she answered.

“I just want to receive from Drew the same amount of love I give to him.”

Chapter Seventeen

Louis felt discontented as he left Faye's apartment. Louis knew he got what he went to her for, she forgave him for his lack of boundaries last night and he got to meet her with a clear head. Louis just did not know if he was doing either Faye or Drew a favor by patching things over between them. Louis could tell that they loved each other very deeply the fact was Drew's deep was a puddle to Faye's ocean and Louis felt a sick sense of wrongness with allowing her to settle for less than an ocean in return.

As Louis pulled up to Drew's he had this sick realization that Drew might not have enough experience in trauma in order to handle Faye's, Drew was going to destroy himself because he would not handle whatever had happened to Faye well. Even though Faye had never told Louis or alluded to her past Louis was troubled enough himself to know it was game changing. It was something Faye felt at one point was worth dying over. Suicidal memories stop killing the host in a direct fashion, instead in a more insidious fashion the memories kill the joy of those around the host. Thus killing the host by isolation and with the utter fear that no one will simply understand.

When Drew asked how it went Louis wanted to warn Drew that only pain would come of loving Faye, for both him and her, but instead Louis told Drew what Faye told him to that she would come over for dinner; tomorrow. Louis felt his stomach sink when Drew's smile expanded across his whole face, then he hugged Louis, and thanked him. While Louis wanted to take this moment and warn Drew of what he saw in Faye's eyes he couldn't force himself too. The reason lay in the way Drew's eyes were looking at Louis full of brotherly love and the deepest affection, not a drop of judgement from their talk earlier, and Louis realized this moment wasn't just about Drew or Drew and Faye, it was about him too. Louis felt the unconditional love he begged Danny to show him in Drew's eyes and Louis refused to ruin it.

The rest of the day featured Drew and Louis bonding after a strained friendship of the past eleven years. Drew avoided asking about Danny as much as he could and Louis was glad, as much as Louis appreciated how understanding Drew was, his life style and who he really was, it was still a heartbreak and Louis did not feel like he could talk about it sober yet.

Louis asked about Monica and how she was handling how young Faye was and Drew explained how he hasn't talked to Monica since their fight weeks ago. Drew had tried to reach out but Monica simply sent him to voicemail every time, and she never called him back. Drew talked about how she just needed to get over the hurt of him dating someone new and once she did she would come around. Louis wasn't so sure,

Monica and Louis were always close growing up and he knew that once her limit was reached, Monica would snap all cords of connection with a person. Louis wondered if Drew flaunted his new relationship in her face was the last betrayal she could handle.

“I haven’t heard from her in six months,” Louis said. “I did hear though that Peter has tried to reach out to her a few times over the past few weeks.”

Drew laughed, “I’m not even surprised, and Peter has always had a crush on her. I just hope Shania doesn’t find out, because Monica is not going to turn down Peter in a . . . kind way. He better wait for Monica’s refusal before he leaves or tells Shania.”

Louis agreed. In reality Louis wanted Peter to realize how perfect Shania was for him and how his obsession with Monica was just resentment of Drew winning a bet so long ago. Louis talked about how Peter would always find a way to bring up Monica every time he would talk to him, over the phone, or in person. Louis watched as Drew’s face grew solemn and his forehead creased. Louis kept talking about Peter for a few more minutes trying to get Drew out of his random funk.

“Dude, what’s wrong? What did I say?” Louis asked.

“What if Monica for some odd reason, maybe to get back at me for dating Faye, or something, what if she goes with Peter?”

“Monica knows that would wreck Peter’s whole family,” Louis replied. “Monica wouldn’t do that to our family or Peter’s, she isn’t that type of person. You know that Drew, why are you so worried about it. I mean even if she does, how does it even effect you anymore?”

Drew looked away and scratched the back of his neck. “It doesn’t I just don’t think I like the idea of her with Peter.”

“Is it Peter that bothers you or is it picturing Monica with anyone other than you?”

Drew never answered Louis, instead he got up and started sorting through his mail. Louis let the conversation drop knowing nothing healthy would come of Drew’s answer. At the same moment ten minutes away Monica was pulling on her work clothes and wondering if she should ask out her neighbor, Max, who moved in a few weeks ago.

Monica saw Max every few days walking his Pitbull Iago when she came home from work. Max was always dressed in relaxed jeans and loose fighting flannels with work boots. Monica never had a lengthy conversation with Max, but she had caught him a few times watching her walk up the stairs and she might

have walked with a slightly slower more exaggerated gate, for his eyes to watch. With the thought in mind that she would ask him to coffee today if she saw him, Monica applied a little extra lipstick, as she was just swiping her lips the last time she turned as a knock came from her front door. Monica yelled a coming and when she answered she was very disappointed to see Peter, again.

Peter had showed up at her place four times in the past month, each time with a less convincing excuse to why he wanted to see her. The first time it was the friendly, make sure she is okay with Faye, visit. Danny had stopped by a few days before as well, she was used to her families concern, but when Peter stopped by a week later asking for real estate advice, when she knew Shania had no want to move, Monica knew he was stopping by for a different reason. Her suspicions were confirmed when Peter asked to take her out to a friendly dinner the last visit and he wore a suit to the dinner and begged to pay.

This time when Monica saw it was Peter she sighed and left the door open for him to enter. Peter closed the door behind him, thinking the casual attitude was a sign that she was growing very comfortable with him. Peter sat down at her breakfast bar and started to ask how her week was going, what she had planned for today, for this weekend, and when Monica gave barely more than a mumbles Peter realized he was going to have to act blunt.

“Mon, I know that you have thought of reasons as to why I have stopped by more often than before and the reason is...remember middle school when Drew asked you out?” Peter asked and Monica in her shock just nodded. “Well, Drew and I had a bet because we both liked you but I called dibs but Drew didn’t care, so we made this bet over who you would say yes to. I was supposed to go first but I got held after class that day and Drew asked you first instead, which was cheating, and because of this you dated and then married him. You never got to know my feelings, and I think if you did you would have picked me.” Monica tried to interrupt him but Peter just started talking louder and faster. “You see I’ve waited years, Monica, years for you and Drew to break up, and then you married him, so I figured I had to marry Shania, and then you two broke up but I figured you’d need time and I didn’t want to act as a rebound for you. Then Drew started dating that child and I knew my time had finally come to sweep you off your feet, because how could you have any feelings for Drew now, when he disrespected you by dating Faye? All I am saying is that I love you Monica. I have since we were kids and all I am asking for is a chance, a chance to prove to you that you deserve ever second of a man’s attention, and I will give you every moment of mine.”

Monica stood frozen in the middle of her living room lipstick open and hanging from her fingers, while Peter waited with anxious eyes and dry lips for her response. A response he never figured would fail to bring him happiness. Monica tried to process everything Peter said, she knew he always had a crush on her, but what Peter was suggesting was that he would live his family, his wife, and his child for her. As much as Monica had zero feelings of that nature for Peter, Monica could not deny the euphoria she was feeling at Peter's words. The power Peter had handed over to Monica was intoxicating and all she wished was that it was anyone other than squat, Greek letter wearing, pig nosed Peter giving this to her. Peter snapped her out of her frozen state by grabbing her hands and placing them on his heart.

"So what do you say Mon?" Peter asked. "Do you want to try this? Do you want to have a man make you his world?"

"Do I? Of course." Monica said in a shushed tone and Peter's smiled stretched across his face and he leaned down to kiss Monica. "No, Peter." Monica pulled away from him. "I want that of course I do, but not with you. You are married and if you are willing to give up Shania and your kids respect then you are not the man that I always thought you were. Peter you are better than begging for a women to love you."

"I'm not begging for you to love me, I know that you do, and I've always known."

"I've loved you like a brother Peter. I've respected you and maybe at times I wished for Shania's life because you treat her in a way that I wished Drew treated me."

"I always treated her in such a way as I wanted to treat you. I needed you to see that a love like you wanted was possible."

"I don't believe you only did it for me Peter. You love Shania." Monica insisted while putting a few more feet between herself and Peter. "You should go home Pete. Go home to your *wife* and look at her and try to think about why you love her and don't ever tell her you did this, she doesn't deserve that pain. I don't want you like that Pete, you are my brother and I love you like on." Peter did not move, his smile was failing and Monica could tell that he was growing very upset. "Peter I think it is best if you leave before you do or say something you can't take back."

"You love me I know you do! Drew ruined everything, and now he has turned you against me!" Peter turned around and grabbed the first object he saw that would break. He picked up Monica's breakfast plate and threw it against the wall. Monica flinched at the noise and with slow and silent steps made her way over to her cell phone.

Peter grabbed Monica's mug from that morning as well as again tossed it against the wall, then he looked at Monica who was dialing for Drew and pinned her down with his gaze. "Is that what I need to do to get you to say you'll love me? Do I need to break things and throw a fit like Drew always did? I heard about the fights and how he would make a mess of your house everything you two fought. I'll act like that if that is something you need, is it Monica? Do you need to date someone who abuses you and your love?" Peter was breathing hard and his fist kept clenching and releasing. "Answer me... why do I have to do?" Peter broke out into sobs.

Monica realized the threat had passed and put down her phone, unused. She approached Peter and took one of his hands away from his face. She with a gentle voice led him over to her couch and sat him down. Monica held Peter's hand and waited for him to calm down. She coached him to take deep breathes in through the nose and out through the mouth and finally with a few hiccups Peter pulled his second hand away from his face. Peter felt ashamed at his lack of control and he did not understand where it came from.

"It's okay Pete, I get it. A broken heart doesn't really heal, it makes us act odd. I forgive you." Monica squeezed his hand and Peter kissed the top of her head. After a few moments of shared silence Peter got up without a word and left Monica a little shaken on her couch. Peter went home and watched his wife interact with his son. Shania looked up from where she was teaching Trevor how to test to see if the tomatoes were ripe enough for picking and she smiled her full on dimpled smile at Peter. His heart swelled at her love for him and it dropped at his betrayal. Monica was right he did love Shania but his hold on the past was not letting him see what he had in front of him.

Peter walked out into the garden and knelt down next to Shania and kissed her on the cheek. "I love you, Turtle." Shania blushed at the nickname.

"You haven't called me that in years."

"You stopped acting shy it never seemed appropriate to call you that. But I love you and I loved you when you were my shy little turtle." Shania's eyes glossed over and with her dirt covered gloves pulled Peter into a burning kiss with Trevor in the background making gaging noises. When Shania broke away Peter realized the least he could do for his wife was to never see Monica again, and he didn't.

Chapter Eighteen

Faye drove to the airport with a smile plastered on her face, Drew and Faye had survived six months together and she was amazed at how seamless their relationship had fallen into place in her life. Faye had grown accustomed to not seeing Drew for two weeks at a time and she flourished in his constant attention those other two weeks. They had celebrated Thanksgiving together and Christmas was shared between Danny and Peter's. Faye felt as if she was finding a fit in Drew's family unit. Even Stella and Lucy were starting to think maybe this was the exact type of relationship Faye needed, enough time together to feel loved but enough time apart to have her space and color cube time, even though she had felt herself slip less and less often into the color cube mentality which she knew was a sign that she was happy.

Faye parked and waited for Drew to come to her, they had established this routine of Faye picking him up at the airport because they found that seeing each other immediately lead to some pretty intense car sex. Faye adjusted her stockings and checked her make-up for the thirtieth time. As soon as she put the visor back up she saw him walking towards her, but Faye saw that he wasn't walking alone. Faye squinted and felt her veins turn to ice, Drew was walking with a young women, a women Faye knew. A women that Faye hoped to never see again after high school. Faye closed her eyes and told herself to go into her mental safe house which was her original color cube before she found painting. Faye's breathing evened out by the time Drew opened up the passenger door.

"Faye, look who I found! This is Maddie she is a flight attendant for SouthWest, and she happened to tell me that she went to high school in Battle Creek, and well with you! Crazy small world, I invited to give her a ride to a friend's house in town. I figured you'd like to chit chat with someone from your past."

Faye was frozen she didn't know how to respond and by the look on Maddie's face nor did she. Maddie had not realized this was who Drew had talked about. "You go by Faye now?" Maddie asked.

"Yes. Since college." Faye grounded out. Drew gave her a confused look and Maddie chirped in.

"She used to go by her middle name Elizabeth, well Lizzy, she always said Faye didn't sound like a real name."

"You never told me that." Drew said.

Faye just shrugged her shoulders and told them to get in. When Drew offered to drive Faye denied him saying he had to be tired. Faye needed to drive to get her mind off who was sitting in the back of her car

and she needed to stay calm. Faye decided that as long as they were talking about something neutral it would make time speed up.

“I didn’t know you worked as a flight attendant.” Faye asked.

Maddie responded by telling her how she went to college and studied abroad and fell in love with the job watching others do it. Maddie was learning Spanish and French so she could eventually work at the international level, but for now she was happy being stationed out of Grand Rapids. Faye asked a few follow up questions and then steered the conversation over to how Drew and her knew each other.

“I was in the lounge charging my laptop before flying as the deadhead to Grand Rapids” Drew starts “and I overhear Maddie here talking on the phone about Battle Creek and once she was done with her call I told her my girlfriend is originally from there and after a few questions I realized you two most likely went to the same school. Then Maddie tells me she is on my flight and I realized that it would make your day to see a friend from home.”

Faye wanted to barf, Maddie was a part of her life she never wanted to expose Drew to and yet it was becoming obvious by her lack of enthusiasm that he was starting to see that something was wrong. Thankfully, before Drew could make a scene they arrived at Maddie’s friends place. Faye turned off the car and offered to walk Maddie to the door. Once they were there Faye turned to Maddie.

“I’m trying to avoid talking to Drew about...you know so can we hug and pretend we don’t hate each other?” Faye asked.

“Had I known it was you I would have never agreed to the ride, I am sorry. I know you don’t care or believe me but I’m sorry.” Maddie hugged her and they both laughed and waved bye.

Faye got in the car and tried her best to change the topic every time Drew brought Maddie up. Faye managed that tactic until after their shower, once they had changed and she was brushing her teeth Drew turned to her and opened fire.

“So what are you trying to avoid telling me about Maddie and you? No more bullshit and trying to talk around the subject. You have acted odd since you saw her and I don’t understand why.”

Faye spit out her toothpaste before she turned to Drew and said, “It doesn’t matter and I’d rather not talk about it.” Drew opened his mouth and Faye stopped him, “Drop it Drew. I mean it, no more questions.”

It wasn't until the next morning while Faye was flipping the pancakes that Drew mentioned it again. He had snuck up behind her and placed a kiss on the back of Faye's neck and when she flinched his eyes hardened, Faye had not flinched from him in weeks, Drew knew it had to do with the run-in with Maddie.

"Are you serious Faye? Are we back to you jumping any time I touch you? Just great, I love dating someone who is afraid of me for no reason." Drew wanted to pick up a plate and smash to release some of his tension, but he saw how scared Faye already was and Drew did not want to scare her, not Faye. "Just tell me what it is about Maddie that has you like this?"

Faye couldn't tell Drew the truth she knew even if she wanted to, which she most certainly did not, she would not have the strength to get the words past her mental barriers. She had spent too many years deleting it from her memories, she had spent hours and hours meditating enough so the memories would not randomly resurface. All that remained was that she flinched sometimes when touched, she was proud of herself for that and she did not owe Drew anything.

"Remember when we first met and you asked why I didn't want kids and I said personal and told you a key was required to unlock all my demons?" Drew nodded hoping they were getting somewhere. "Well this secret is with that one, they are interwoven. It's the reason I had an abortion, it is why I find it so hard to love people, and why I don't talk to my parents anymore. It all relates back to Maddie and I cannot talk about it, not to you, and not out loud."

"Why not? I would never judge you, I am here for you, we are a unit and I want to help you carry your baggage."

Faye let out a bitter chuckle, "You can't help me carry this because I am not going to tell you what it is. I am asking you to drop it Drew."

"What happens if I don't?"

"I leave and not just for today but I pack up my shit and I leave you forever Drew. This is the do not cross line, this is my point of no return."

"I can handle this, I am not going to run from you no matter what you tell me." Drew explained.

"Drew, I don't care if you can handle it or not. I know I can't handle telling you, I can't relive this part of my life that I have spent year's suppressing and trying to move on from."

"You'd leave me instead of sharing this with me, I don't understand that. I love you and if you loved me you would trust me with this. What are you keeping from me?" Drew demanded an answer his brain was

going wild with ideas of what was so terrible she felt she couldn't even talk about it. Drew lashed out and told her how she was acting as a coward would and how he thought she was more mature than this. Drew went on for twenty minutes brow beating Faye to the point her burning the pancakes in favor of holding her sides and balling. Faye felt her future slip away from her, she wanted to stay with Drew she did but he wouldn't stay if she didn't tell him and if he kept pushing she would tell them. She knew she didn't have the strength to leave, after seeing Maddie yesterday and the horrible nightmares all night Faye was drained, emotionally and physically.

Faye pleaded, "please Drew, don't make me do this it will wreck me."

Drew pulled Faye into a hug knowing he had won. He kissed her temple and whispered, "You have to trust that I can hold you together."

Chapter Nineteen

Faye found herself wrapped in Drew's down comforter with a cup of tea in her hands, she couldn't feel the heat from the cup nor could she hear what Drew was whispering in her ear. All she knew was that she warned him about what talking about this would do to her. Drew was worried about Faye but also about their relationship, after she told him about Maddie and growing up she had looked at him for the first time in the over three hour monologue.

Faye had started off by agreeing to tell him to story if he agreed not to interrupt a single time, if she was going to get it out she had to get it out all at once, no stops and no breaks. She had sat herself on the couch and closed her eyes, her breathing evened out and she spent fifteen minutes in the safety of her mind before she felt she could talk. When she did she didn't stop.

"My parents moved us to Battle Creek when I was five, so I've always known it as home. Well we had one neighboring house that was close enough to hang out with. This is where Maddie lived. She was a year younger than me and at first she was friends with both my sister and I but after a few years I started to notice how Maddie only wanted to play with my sister and I like any child got jealous. Maddie was my best friend and really my only friend at the time, I was shy and weird even at seven."

"I came home from first grade with Maddie one day and she invited me over to play at her house, which we never did because my house had the best dolls and toys, plus we had a slide and a swing set. Anyways, Maddie asked me to come over to play and not to invite my sister so of course I was beyond excited. When we got inside I realized Maddie's parents weren't home, which is another reason she always came to our house, my mom only worked part time and was home when we got out of school. Maddie's parents I learned when I got older held less than average jobs. Maddie's mom was a stripper and her dad sold stolen cars."

"I remember telling Maddie that we should go to my house, I wasn't allowed to hang out there without a parent, but Maddie told me that my sister was too scared to play the game that she wanted to play so she asked me. You have to understand Drew, I needed her friendship back. My mother always idealized my sister over me, my mother grew up telling me she had me just so Kathleen would have someone to play with. I was not wanted by my own mom and even at seven when I didn't have words for what I felt I knew I needed Maddie to pick me over Kathleen, so I stayed that day and I went back for the next year, just because I wanted to feel like someone's first choice."

“I was seven Drew when I learned how to moan and I thought I was play acting, like all kids do. I was simply mimicking the sounds I heard like a parrot. Unlike a parrot I knew my sounds were wrong, of course I did. I was seven when Maddie taught me about sex and to be fair Maddie never called it that. She always just said ‘let’s play channel ninety-nine’ no one else would know what she meant, but I did. This was before we had hundreds of channels for one low price. This was when anything about fifty was pay per view, in other words channel ninety-nine I now know to call, cable porn.”

“The thing is Drew I was excited when Maddie first told me about this secret, it was going to stay between just her and me and I felt our friendship blossoming. Maddie made me pinky swear that I wouldn’t tell my parents or hers what we were doing or what channel ninety-nine was. I remember how thrilled I was at making that promise, a promise that if I broke it would end our friendship. I can still feel how hard my heart was beating that day when I watched her flick the channels higher and higher until she got to ninety-nine. Maddie had to type in a number code, I don’t know how she knew what it was I didn’t think to ask back then. Sometimes I wonder if I had known what was about to happen, what I was about to see and then do, if I would have ran away. Then I think that my adrenaline would have kept me from turning away and going home. This was something secret and new, and growing up in the sheltered home that I did, you didn’t give that up.”

“That first time I don’t remember what we saw on the T.V. I can only recall that it was the first time I had ever seen a boy naked. My mom used to bathe my sister and I together but these women looked nothing like either of us. I don’t let this disturbing entrance into sex haunt me anymore Drew, I’ve grown and created coping mechanisms but I flinch at touches because for a year my only friend touched me and I didn’t know I was allowed to ask for help. Now I dodge hugs and hate sex driven movies and it isn’t because I’m broken I just don’t know how to explain to people that my brain doesn’t know a good touch from a bad sometimes.”

“You want me to tell you everything that happened but why? Do you just want to fix me because if that is the only reason you might as well stop me now because this isn’t something that is fixable, I have to learn to get over it and I am, I really am? You aren’t the first man who has begged me to tell him, but I can’t ever seem to get to the *climax* of the tale and why should I? What do I owe you?”

Faye closed her eyes and she heard Drew inhale and knew he was about to speak, if Drew talked Faye knew she wouldn’t continue. Faye held up her hand in a stop motion and curled her legs up and under her, hugging her knees into her chest. She pictured a blank canvas and Faye kept her eyes close and painted it

with her mind, at the same time she let the story flow out of her mouth. Drew heard how disconnected her voice was but if this was the only way she could get it off her chest then he wasn't going to complain.

"I enjoyed it, on some basic physical level I enjoyed it. The first time Maddie was wearing these purple corduroy overalls, I can still see her taking them off and laying down in front of me telling me to act out what was on the T.V. Maddie had sprawled out on the couch and she wanted me to 'kiss her down there' her words. I couldn't say no she was my best friend and I was a neglected kid, I wanted her attention. So I did what she wanted I was seven and I went down on my female neighbor."

"I... I remember feeling weird about seeing her move when I touched her. I felt that it was wrong but she kept telling me I was doing a good job. I wanted to leave so bad and the first few times we did this I cried asking to leave and she called me a coward and said if I didn't play this game with her she'd find new friends. That scared me so much more than this game did, I was just so lonely. Kathleen stopped thinking it was cool to hang out with her little sister and my dad started taking jobs out of the state so he was never home to make my mom take care of me.

"The funny thing is I remember that first time I told her that I didn't know how to kiss so how could I kiss her down there, and so she goes," Faye let out a broken laugh, 'If you don't try I won't be your friend anymore.' And what do you know I was a natural born kisser after that. God I cried so much the first few times just before after during I hated it but Maddie didn't care she wanted someone to play with her. I learned just a few years ago that her dad went to jail because Maddie's mom caught him raping their five year old daughter. I think that is why Maddie needed to play the game, she didn't know what was happening to her but this way she was in control of it. I don't know but that helps me forgive her and myself."

Drew wanted to reach for Faye, her story was sucking the color from her face and she was trembling but Drew knew that she would allow him to touch her right now. Instead he reached over to the chair and grabbed the comforter that Faye had brought out with her this morning. As quickly as Drew could he draped it over Faye and when she wrapped her hands around it and let out a pleased sigh she picked up her story.

"Did you know that in the late 1800's when a child was born as a hermaphrodite in Europe, and if the outside sexual organs were male but the insides were female they'd make a fake vagina. Well this vagina would heal and shut up if it wasn't messed with while the baby was growing. To prevent this the doctors would send the parents' home with a medical version of a dildo and the instruction to stimulate a baby with their fingers and with this *tool* until the baby was on the verge of climaxing. Did you know babies could

climax? I didn't until my junior year in college, I learned this in an Anthropology class and it changed my life. I used to think I was freak because at seven I was able to feel pleasure and climax in a way, then I learned this and realized I wasn't evil or wrong, it was not my spirit finding pleasure it was just my confused body."

"It took weeks of playing the game with Maddie before I even remotely felt pleasure but eventually I did and I loved it, the way my insides felt they were melting and I was coming undone like a puzzle falling to the floor. I had no words for it at that age but I orgasmed Drew, over and over again with Maddie and it fucked me up for years. Every time I would go home after playing with Maddie I thought God knew what we had done and he was going to send me to Hell. I was raised Catholic and I knew intrinsically that what we were doing was going to send me to Hell. I was scared but I couldn't stop even though I loved church and everything Catholic, well until I was sixteen. I was an altar girl even, I thought the more I through myself into church the easier it would be for God to forgive me for my sins as a child. I repented and went to confession every Sunday when I was old enough and even though I never told the Father exactly what I was repenting for my sin was Lust and I did thousands of Hail Mary's and Our Father's in order to save my soul, but I never felt clean or forgiven."

"Even now, I am not Catholic or religious but I feel dirty all the time. I felt judged for something that shouldn't have happened, something our parents should have noticed and stopped. The thing is I did eventually tell on us but not because I had some moral change or finally had enough. No I was pissed, jealous, and heartbroken."

Faye was starting to hyperventilate and Drew didn't know how to help her. He knew he couldn't say anything and Faye's eyes were closed so he couldn't even get her attention. The only thing Drew could think of doing was to make her stop telling the story, but Drew really believed he was doing the right thing. He believed with every fiber of himself that Faye needed to tell this story. Instead of making her stop Drew put a tea kettle on the stove and waited for Faye to feel normal enough to talk again. It took until after the kettle hissed and the mug was placed on the table in front of Faye before she opened her story again.

"I went over to Maddie's on a Sunday, we never hung out on Sunday's because I was always at church and trying to get my mom to notice me. This Sunday though my mom wasn't home so I went over to Maddie's to surprise her. I didn't go over there to play the game I just wanted to hang out with her. When I walked into her house her mom was I know now strung out on meth but at the time she just looked tired to me. Her mom told me that Maddie was in the basement and I walked my happy ass down to the basement. I

saw right away the same kind of fort that she and I would build to hide away when we played our game. Then I heard breathy sounds, Maddie knew to keep quiet when playing the game so I remember feeling so confused. I thought maybe she didn't know her mom was up and she was playing the game without me. No, Maddie was face deep in our classmate Ciera. I was so upset, she had promised me, promised that this was our game our secret!"

Tears started streaming down Faye's face and Drew for the first time regretted ever bringing Faye to this point. Faye looked shattered and Drew wondered if this is what she meant by this retelling would wreck her.

"How sick of me right to think that? I didn't even want to play in the beginning and now months later she had betrayed me and brought in someone new and I was crushed. I was handed an out and I could have taken it and let Maddie play with someone new, which is what I wanted, but deep down I couldn't handle the rejection. I had done this for months with Maddie and I never wanted to which she knew, she knew how important her friendship was to me, what I was willing to do to keep it and yet she did that. I know we were only seven and she didn't think of it like that, but I did even then. I felt it cut me open like the death of a sister, the end of an era. I realized though in watching Ciera's face contort in similar ways that Maddie's did when I went down on here and it suddenly stopped feeling like a game, it felt ugly and scary. I was filled with this sense of dread watching them. I remember how static the air flowing around me felt and I remember taking two steps backwards planning to flee home and never think about this game again, but then Ciera locked eyes with me."

"Ciera was in my grade and because of this moment she always felt like she was better than me because when she saw me standing on the stairs looking every ounce of fear I had felt the last year, she called out to me saying, '*if you stay you got to play*'. I looked to Maddie and she nodded and of course I stayed. I stayed for a few more weeks while Ciera taught us how fingers were better than tongues and how the arm rest of couches, if we straddled it, would evoke the same feeling but faster if we rubbed ourselves against it. Ciera made the game more into an addiction for me, because all I wanted was Maddie and her sole attention back. Ciera would go over to Maddie's all the time and I would feel myself just get so confused and mad. I knew what they were doing and I hated it. I would join them all the time and I never cried over it again. I would touch Maddie whenever she wanted and it soon became just for Maddie, she stopped touching me and I only touched her and then Ciera would, it was like we were battling for Maddie and I was losing."

“I never let Ciera touch me, I never even considered what we were doing as sexual. I saw it when Ciera joined as competition and I had to win, because I would lose everything if I didn’t. Which is funny because when it all came to an end it wasn’t my fault. Ciera was too loud or something and Maddie’s mom came down to see what the noise was and saw them in action, I was at church, it was a Sunday and Maddie told her everything that we had done, she never mentioned her dad touching her, I’m not sure why. Anyways, Maddie’s mom sent Ciera home and told Maddie she couldn’t stay friends with her. Maddie had blamed everything on Ciera.”

“So the next day when I came over we weren’t allowed to play alone which I was happy with. That trend continued for the next week until Maddie’s mom started getting high again. When I asked Maddie what happened to Ciera and her Maddie told me the truth and I felt in that moment the most powerful sense of safety. I thought if I blamed it all on Ciera too I can stay friends with Maddie, so that night after we played our game I went home and prayed to God that my plan would work out. I woke up and I remember I had this dream where I wasn’t allowed into heaven because I had lied to my mom about our game. I couldn’t lie because I thought God would hate me and that was so much worse than Maddie hating me.”

Faye turned and looked at Drew without really seeing him. Her eyes were glassy but she had stopped crying for a while. Drew smiled at her as encouragement to finish her story and he flinched when Faye smiled and it didn’t reach her eyes.

“I went to my mom in the morning knowing I would tell her everything and she would feel so bad for letting this happen to me and she would hug me and everything would end up okay. Instead when I told her she hit me and screamed and told me I was a demon child. I can still picture her making the sign of the cross over my body, after she pushed me to the ground, and screaming *your body is a temple, your body is a temple, your body is a temple* over and over again. My mother punished me and told me if I had better morals, more God in my holy temple this would not have happened. That is why it didn’t happen to my sister she said, because my sister was better than me, more saint-like. My mom that following Sunday made me go to confession and tell the priest what I had *allowed* to take place, as if I asked for this to happen, as if it hadn’t destroyed me for the past year.”

“My mother acted like I did this to her. She always looked at me with contempt, I was a creative kid to begin with and she didn’t understand that. This incident was just nail in the casket that labeled me as different. My mother blamed me, stating she had raised me better than what had happened to me. I was so

desperate for human affection that I clung to Maddie even though I knew she was a life raft with a hole in the center, leaking out like a time bomb, and I would sink with it. Maddie later switched school and developed an anxiety disorder, she pulled out her hair and eyelashes. Which is why I was so surprised to see her holding down a real and decent job. It fucked her up what we did and I understand that, she went to rehab at sixteen then again at eighteen. I should be just as fucked up...but I'm not, at least not all the time. I'm not by any means sane but I've dealt with it better. How is that fair or normal? What if I am just now coming apart at the seams because I never really stopped playing the game? I always touched myself after that because I missed her and I thought this would keep her with me. I never stopped not till I was old enough to realize what I was doing. Then I realized masturbation wasn't wrong but every time I try now I feel just as gross and scared as I did as a child."

Faye couldn't breathe she felt the walls closing in around her neck, pressing her down and she couldn't get in a decent lungful of air but she had to finish the story, she had to. "What if I can't sleep or let people hug me because all I see is what we did? What would that mean for me? Why is it that I can't remember everything or even most of it, why won't my mind let me access everything? Is it because I spent years burying this year of my life? What if the reason Maddie went off the edge for a while is because she remembered everything, what if you are making me remember everything and by doing that I go off the edge too. Is my edge coming Drew, am I about to fall? You are trying to make me face a past...a past that...a past that doesn't even have a face."

Faye trails off and Drew realized that Faye was done, Faye had reached her emotional limit. Drew picked up the mug of tea and tested it with his finger, finding that it had gone cold Drew went back to the kettle and poured her a new mug. This one was still rather warm and had some tendrils of steam coming off of it. Drew gently grabbed Faye's hands and wrapped them around the mug. Drew scooted close to her and whispered sweet nothings in her ear, and when that didn't work he started just rambling hoping something would draw her out of her funk. He talked about planes and how he wanted to get his hang glider license. He talked about maybe going to get his flight instruction certification and maybe start teaching so he could stay in one place. He told her everything he could think of about the physics of flying and why power off stalls was his favorite.

In a last resort after almost a half hour a silence Drew said, “You know Faye your past does have a face, I can tell you what it is if you just ask.” Faye didn’t lift her gaze from the cooling mug. “Come on Faye I know you want to know. Just ask me, please...please say something.” Drew started to beg as he felt afraid.

Faye’s voice came out broken and small, barely louder than a moth’s wings beating. “What is the face then?”

Drew let out a relieved gasp, “It is a little seven year old Faye and she wants you to help set her free. She thinks you hate her and judge her for things she couldn’t control. She needs you to realize you put too much maturity on her. You need to look at baby Faye and say you forgive her, that you forgive yourself.”

Faye closed her eyes again and pictured herself at seven with bright blonde hair that hadn’t darkened yet, piled high on my head in my mom’s version of a pony tail, she thinks she looks like Pebbles Flintstone. Faye sees herself missing two bottom teeth, with her freckles covering her nose and her hazel eyes looking so carefree. Faye smiles at her youthful self and she smiles back. Faye reaches a hand out to her and she just looked at it. Faye whispers it is okay and laced her fingers with her younger self. Faye realizes she can’t forgive her yet, she isn’t ready but Faye could learn to love herself.

Chapter Twenty

Louis pulled on his Kevlar vest, strapping his ballistic knife to his thigh, he looked up at Samson and without speaking, they both made sure the other was ready for the next twelve hours. The physical trial was to begin that day and their job was to get Heather and Xavier to the stands in order to testify and then back to the safe house. Louis knew that even if Samson and he performed at a hundred percent one of Maroni's men were coming after them. Louis and Samson had spent the last six months preparing and keeping Heather and Xavier safe, in order to get them to the stands. Heather and Xavier had witnessed one of Maroni's men shooting Heather's boss, who was keeping some of Maroni's books of legal radar. Turns out Heather's boss, Zachary Mills was skimming a little off the top every few weeks. Maroni found out and sent his heavy lifter Jimmy the Barber, a man who got his name from his MO of scalping his victims.

Heather and her boyfriend Xavier were at a nightclub in downtown Chicago when Heather realized she left her phone at work, Mills' Accounting, where Heather worked as a secretary. Heather had dragged Xavier back to work, unlocking the back door with her keys, even though he asked her to wait until the next day. Heather snuck them in and went into her desk and while she was collecting her phone she heard shouting from her boss, Zachary Mills, office. Heather had the curse of curiosity, she peeked around the corner and when seeing the lamp light coming out of the bottom of Mr. Mills' door she crept closer. Mr. Mills was known for having late night liaisons at the office with paid women.

Xavier found Heather on her knees with her ear pressed against her boss's door. "What are you doing?" He hissed.

"Shit is going down inside, I think his wife found out about him cheating." Heather replied.

Xavier sighed and went to press his ear against the door as well and the second before his ear made contact a bang rang out. "Was that a gun?" Xavier asked eyes growing wide.

Xavier grabbed Heather and dragged her into the closet that was closest. Heather was breathing hard and gripping Xavier's hand as her life line. Xavier was running through the possible scenarios in his mind, it could be the wife, and she shot in anger and betrayal. It could turn out that a disgruntled employee had shot him for a number of reasons. Xavier knew enough about Heather's job to know that Zachary Mills was not going to win any Chicago best boss award. What Xavier never thought was a reality was the Zachary Mills was working for the Italian Mob and Mills' Accounting was just a cover company for the Mobster Maroni and his corporations.

Heather and Xavier after several minutes of silence exited the broom closet and Heather demanded they go see if Mr. Mills was dead or just wounded. She couldn't live with herself if her boss was alive and they left him to die. Xavier kept Heather behind him as they crouched their way back to Mr. Mills' office. The door was now cracked open and while holding his breathe Xavier lightly pushed it open. Heather peeked her head around Xavier's shoulder and held in a scream by biting at Xavier's shoulder. Laying in a puddle of blood and brain residue was Heather's boss, he was very much dead. Heather never had any hard feelings for her boss, he sometimes came on too strong about what she should wear but he was nice to her always smiling and giving her pay raises whenever she had to take on more work. Plus Mr. Mills was training her to become his junior accountant, it was her dream job, Heather held a MA in accounting and working for a high teared company like Mill's Accounting as an actual accountant was orgasmic to her.

Instead she was clenching her teeth into her boyfriend with tears dripped off her chin. Both Heather and Xavier were frozen at the face of death. However, they quickly ran for it when a new man placed his gun at the temple of Mr. Mills and turned his head in a way that made Mr. Mills' eyes loll over to stare right at Xavier, in all of their glassy perfection. Xavier felt his four beers of the night dribble down his leg and onto the carpet. The man holding the gun, entered Xavier's line of vision and when he lifted his head and saw Xavier and Heather outside the crack in the door he shouted and let off two rounds.

Xavier remembered grabbing Heather's arm and dragging her down the stairwell and outside. He did not remember running eight blocks straight, he did not remember crying and throwing up, Xavier most certainly did not remember how he ended up at the police station with piss and vomit covered pants still with a death grip on Heather, telling the whole story to the first cop that would listen. Now Xavier was with the U.S. Marshalls putting on his own Kevlar vest and wondering what would have happened if Heather had not dragged him back to her work, to pick up her phone.

Heather understood why Xavier blamed her for their current place in life, she had put them into danger without even realizing it. Heather had always made Xavier do things he was not happy with for the four years of their relationship. Heather made Xavier stop making sculptors and get a 'grown up' job as she always called it. Heather had made Xavier sell his flat and they got a small townhouse on the outside of Chicago together. Now Samson was helping Heather into her Kevlar vest and Xavier hadn't spoken to her in a week.

Samson smiled at Heather, Louis and he had seen how degraded Heather and Xavier's relationship had become in the last few weeks. It was not the first case Louis and Samson had taken where a couple was involved, they had yet to have one make it to the end of the trial and still ask to go into witness protection together. Samson thought maybe Heather and Xavier would stay together by the sole fact that they were true innocents, which was not usually who they handled. About a week ago though Samson after doing his morning patrol walked into the safe house with Louis in the corner of the living room looking out the window. Louis was trying to give Heather and Xavier their space, they were currently as Samson walked in, slinging insults at each other. Heather had accused him of acting like a child about everything and leaving her on her own to cope, and Xavier had told her he blamed her for putting them in this situation.

Everything had escalated when the past mixed with the present. Xavier started blaming Heather for his life in general and not just the latest incident. He told her he hated that she wouldn't let him pursue his art, and without his art he felt as if he was nothing, just a human form with no essence no purpose.

"Wind echo's inside of me now, I have no substance." Xavier whispered to Heather, "Art was my blood and you called it a poison you thought that you could *treat*. I need my sculptors and my hands call out to me all the time to make something anything with them, but you tie them together with *yours*! I don't want to end up tied to you if it means living like this, I want to feel the marble cracking under my force, and I want to mold metal and glass to my mental image. Heather, I need to create more than just an end to my life."

Heather was crying softly into her hands while her elbows rested on the kitchen counter. Heather turned toward Xavier, "You act like you hate me."

Xavier tilted his head and acknowledged Samson's form, "I don't hate you Heather, but I certainly don't love you anymore."

That was the last time Samson saw Xavier even look directly at Heather, and to her benefit she was handling it with grace. Louis gave up his room and Samson and he started rotating who slept in the other bedroom and who slept on the couch.

"Smile today will go smooth, you just have to say what you say like you rehearsed answer a few questions and once you and Xavier are done we come back here and wait a few days to see if they need you again. Then it is over and you get a new life." Samson tried to speak with a reassuring voice but it was not one of his practice qualities, he was better with men and not handling tears. Heather closed her eyes and

sniffled a few times, Samson looked over to Louis who was done prepping Xavier, and he asked him with his eyes to help.

Louis and Samson switched witnesses and Louis held out a tissue, he had grabbed from the counter moments before, to Heather. She said a muffled thank you and cleaned up her makeup and blew her nose. Louis offered to throw it away for her and it gained him another thank you.

“Alright Heather I’m going to go through what you need to expect from the next hour, then you are going to repeat it back to me, okay?” Louis asked and Heather nodded. “Samson is going to leave with Xavier first and exactly ten minutes after the door closes we are going to leave. We are going to take the back stairs and exit this building through the disabled fire escape. An unmarked black SUV is waiting for us one block to the west and you are going to enter first then I will follow behind you. It is a five minute drive to the underpass where we switch vehicles into another unmarked black SUV. Then a twenty minute drive to the courthouse, we are going to enter through security dock and we will meet up with armed guards once we exit our vehicle. They will see us safely inside and into the waiting room. This is where we will meet up with your lawyer and he will coach you one last time on what to say and what to expect. You will then change into your court clothes and I will personally walk you to the doors and Samson who is already inside with Xavier will guard you from that point on while I watch over Xavier and get him back to the room, here, safe. Got all of that?”

Heather’s shaking voice rang out an okay, then she cleared it and said, “I will follow you all the way to the court house where I will meet with Lance my lawyer and go over my testimony. I will do whatever you tell me to do on the way to the court house and when I get to the door to the courtroom I will do anything Samson tells me to do until we make it back safe to this room.”

Louis shook his head, “I need the details Heather, and I need to know you know what is going to happen.”

“I know the details okay! I know that at the end of the day I could live or die and I know that this might actually end up as the last time I see Xavier and he won’t even speak to me.” Heather starts sobbing as she turns away from Louis.

“Hey, Heather, Xavier is going through a life changing event and so are you, give it time okay. An event like the one the two of you went through is traumatizing but it also bonds you together. Just give him

some time, I'm sure he will come around." Louis did not like to give false hope but he had less than fifteen minutes to get Heather ready to leave, he needed her to calm down.

"Are you sure? I can't go through all of this without knowing at the end we will go into protection together. I can't start a whole new life with a new name without knowing Xavier will end up knowing who the new me is."

"Xavier is going to go with you, he needs you too, and of course he needs you Heather, starting a new life alone isn't his dream any more than it is yours." Louis pulled Heather into a hug and after a few shaking breathes she was ready.

Chapter Twenty-One

The first day of trial went off without a hitch as did the next seventeen days. The morning of the eighteenth Louis and Samson awoke to a call from their boss saying he was given the clear to start the paperwork for placing Heather and Xavier into witness protection. The case was having its usual hiccups and the estimation was that Heather and Xavier would not need to testify again after their last scheduled date, which was in two weeks. The paper work for relocating witnesses was at this phrase was about twenty days as long as they filed it by the end of the day.

Louis and Samson had the same thought; they had no idea if Xavier was going too relocated with Heather. Heather had tried her best to hold onto hope but with Xavier only speaking to her with niceties it wasn't hard to see Heather falling apart at his lack of want for her. Louis had asked Heather a few times if she was prepared to leave without him and she always said no that she was going with him or not at all. Louis could not force Heather into protection but without it the mob was sure to send someone to take care of her.

Which is why Louis and Samson cornered Xavier that morning before Heather awoke. "We need to talk." Samson said. "Now." Louis added.

"We got the word this morning," Samson said, "to start the paperwork for your new identity within Witness Protection. What Louis and I need to know is are we filing for you and Heather to stay together or are you wanting to go somewhere without her?"

Xavier was standing with his back leaning on the refrigerator. He pulled at his hair for a few moments and finally turned and got the carton of orange juice out, while he poured himself and glass and then drank it in one go he was making up his mind. Xavier put down the now empty glass and took a greedy inhale of air and steeled himself.

"I will not go into protection if Heather comes with me, but if she does not go then I will go. I cannot start a new life with her around me, is that understood?"

Louis knew what this meant for Heather, "If she can't go with you she isn't going. You are signing her death certificate with this choice."

"If I let her come with me I am signing my own. Survival of the fittest right?" Xavier told them he was sorry but he wasn't going to change his mind and with that he locked himself in his room for the rest of the day.

Samson volunteered to tell Heather what Xavier decided but Louis had gave her false hope all those days ago, it was his duty to tell her the truth. With a somber expression Louis knocked on Heathers door. She answered with a sleepy if not sad smile, and Louis for the first time in days thought of Danny and how he would always wake up in the middle of the night with that same smile before he crawled back to Abby's bed. Louis smiled back at Heather pushing his own memories aside and told Heather to take a seat. He sat at the desk chair in the room and she sat crossed legged at the foot of her bed. Louis thought she looked so young in the flannel pants and simple black t-shirt she was in. Her hair was in braided pigtails with the strands hanging loose and she twisted the moonstone ring around and around her middle finger, it was a nervous tick Louis had noticed she had.

"Samson and I got a call this morning saying it is time to start the paperwork for your relocation and I have to let you know that Xavier is not going to relocate with you." Louis found with experience that blunt was best. Heather did not respond at first but she stopped spinning her ring.

"Okay, file for me to go on my own." Heathers voice was calm but soft but Louis was not going to question her answer. It was Louis's job to keep her safe and if she choose to forgo with protection he would have no control of her safety and in essences he would fail her and his badge.

"I'm very happy to hear you take the mature approach Heather. I will start the paperwork and in about a month you can start your new life."

"I just want Xavier to end up happy, I love him."

The weeks dragged on with the trial but on the second Tuesday of March Louis and Samson got a knock on their door and were handed the documents they would need to start the actual process of relocating Heather and Xavier. Samson had agreed to take Xavier who was going to Marfa, Texas under the name of Jack Thompson.

"Well if I ever wanted to turn into a white collar man this name would start that." Xavier replied on hearing the news. "I guess I will have to practice a new signature when I get famous for my sculptors. I could go by Jack Attack! Or something."

"You know that would turn into a name brand, Jack Attack!'s famous metal works enter New York's main stage at fashion week." Heather tried to joke. Xavier just smiled at her and turned back to the file that contained his whole new identity.

“I guess Margret Fletcher sounds like a nice grown up name, I mean I can tell people I’m named after my grandmother.”

“You always hated the name Heather, said it sounded like a stripper.” Xavier joked.

“A nice stripper though.”

A silence fell over the room when Xavier asked, “Are you happy with where they are sending you?”

Louis interrupted, “Remember you can’t tell each other any other details, names are fine but nothing else, otherwise we will have to start the process over and find a new safe house while we wait and I don’t know about you two, but I sure am ready to put all of this behind us.”

Everyone in the room agreed and went to pack up their meager belongings that had collected over the past months. At the end of the night they had one last ‘family’ meal. Samson and Louis went over last minute protocols. Samson then left to buy two disposable phones, when he returned he handed one to Louis.

“Call home let them know you will see them soon.” Samson said then left the room to call his home.

Louis stared at the cheap flip phone in his hand and wondered what home he should call, Danny’s or Drew’s? In the end he dialed to whose voice he heard whispering in his ear. It rang only twice before a muffled and sleepy, “Hello?” reached him. Louis felt his heart restrict and tears prickle at his eyes, the silence had lasted so long.

“Danny, it’s me. I called to let you know I’m coming. . .home soon.”

“Louis?” Danny got out of bed and went into the guest room that Danny had refused to go into since his last talk with Louis. “When?”

“If everything goes well, I’ll spend three months going dark again and then fly home and after this long on a case I am sure to get a while of time off to recoup.”

“Will you stay with me? I mean at my house?”

“I . . .don’t know. Is it going to go as it did before, or will you give me more? Or will I just act as family and you won’t visit me at night?”

“Louis, what do you want?” Louis wanted things to go back to normal, where he at least got Danny at night. Then Louis remembered how heartbroken he felt every dawn when Danny would slink away from him. Louis wanted all of him and he said as much.

“I can’t give you that, we can go back to how we were or you can stay as a brother; and get nothing.”

“Then . . .I want nothing. I love you Danny, goodbye.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Drew ran through the preflight checklist making sure everything was safe for the flight. Every time he flew with Faye he felt extra pressure to keep to the card in his hand. Faye was as relaxed as a seasoned pilot in the co-pilot position. She adjusted her headset and when Drew closed the door behind him and buckled himself in, he looked over at Faye and smiled at her for the go ahead. She cracked open her window and yelled out, "Clear prop!" Drew listened for the small carefree laugh that always followed and gripped her hand when he heard it.

Drew had taken up many passengers over the years in many different planes but flying his friend Chuck's 1968 Cessna 172 was always his prized plane to fly, his last trick in his bag in order to impress. The Cessna, or Drew's baby girl, had not had her system overrun with G100's or GPS. She in fact was all manual and old school, it was flying at its purest to Drew.

Drew started the engine and calls to ground asking for clearance to taxi. "I'm going to teach you to fly today, you ready?" Drew asked Faye

Faye pulled her microphone in, barely brushing her lips, "I was born to fly, I'm going to end up a better pilot than you."

Drew laughed and taxied to the runway, he called to the tower for clearance to take off. "We are just going to stay in the pattern, or practice area. Nothing too fancy for your first lesson, okay?" Faye nodded. "Alright, mixture to rich, throttle to full, zero flaps, and we are off."

Faye watched as the runway melted beneath their tires and she waited for the air to raise them off the ground. It was the moment when the first bit of tire left pavement that Faye loved the most, it made her bones turn hollow, she felt so much like a bird she swore she would start sprouting wings and feathers. Faye saw that they were steadily rising to three thousand feet AGL and like every time Drew took her up, she noticed the strange amount of swimming pools. Growing up Faye only had two friends who had a pool, and only one who had an underground pool. In the air however it seemed, at least over Kalamazoo every few houses had a pool of some fashion. Such simple objects always had intrigued Faye, and flying showed her a part of the world she had always lived in as an intriguing object.

"How is this for an eight month present?" Drew asked.

"It would have gone over better if this wasn't the millionth time you've taken me flying. Other than my 'lesson' today what makes this eight month anniversary worthy?" Faye responded.

“Well two things, one because I have never taken you up in my girl before.” At Faye’s raised eyebrow Drew continued. “My girl, is this beauty we are sitting in. A Cessna 172, I mean her name is Foxtrot Juliette, how sexy is that huh? Not everyone gets to have a ride in her.”

Faye laughed into her headset, “Alright, so I have to fight with a plane for your affection, again I ask how is this flight, in your mistress, a special gift then?”

“The second part you’ll have to wait and see, that comes as a reward for a lesson well down.”

With that Faye grabbed for the yoke and placed her feet on the rudder pedals. She put on her determined face, the same one she wore in her two semesters of chemistry. Faye knew that she did not have the natural pilot ability that Drew and all his pilot buddies were born with. She had a hard time visualizing all the math and physics behind flying. The lingo also lost Faye on more than a single occasion. She was however determined to do better than Drew expected, she wanted him to have pride in her, and also she wanted him to know that she cared about what he told her about flying.

Drew spent the next ten minutes making Faye fly straight north and level at three thousand feet AGL. Then he made her do complete left and right turns while maintaining airspeed and height. Drew quizzed Faye over the instrument names and uses. He asked her to call and talk to the tower a few times and even asked if she wanted to attempt a stale. When Faye screamed out a no, Drew laughed and noticed how white her grip on the yoke was making her knuckles.

“Ready for me to take back the controls Faye?”

“I mean I’m done when you think my first lesson was a success.”

Drew watched Faye and waited for her to look over at him and when she didn’t he asked her to make a left turn while holding three thousand two hundred feet. This time though Drew watched Faye instead of watching the gauges. Drew saw how Faye for a brief second closed her eyes and held her breathe. When she seemed to ready herself she let it out, checked all of her instruments and climbed to the correct altitude before making the turn. Drew noticed how tense Faye was and he started to wonder why she was trying so hard to impress him, was she acting competitive or did she have an alternative reason?

Drew called off the lesson after her turn and told her she passed. “See told you flying was in my blood, I mean I have to have painted so many ravens for a reason right?” Faye laughed. She rubbed her thumbs into her palms and stretched out her fingers while Drew flew them back to the airport. Drew did a touch and go and asked for clearance for flight up to eight thousand feet. “So did I do good, or what?”

Drew nodded and flew towards the coast of Lake Michigan, the sun was sitting in about fifteen minutes and Drew had the night timed down to the last second. Drew looked over towards Faye and asked if she wanted him to pull two G's and she shot back a sassy no do zero. For the next several minutes Drew flew towards the lake while doing tricks that made Faye laugh, squeal, and most important made her smile.

"Faye, I love you." Drew said through the crackle of the headset. Faye smiled and laced her fingers with his for a brief moment.

"You are an idiot, just fly."

Drew needed her to say it back, he craved for the validation she was denying him. Drew had no doubt of Faye's love for him, she had forgiven him time and time again for all of his day to day fails in the relationship. Drew though wanted the words to wash over him in a calm downpour of reassurance.

Drew held the plane level and with skill that comes from several hundred hours of flight time turned toward Faye and relied on instinct to fly his girl without looking. "I need you to understand that I will always love you, these last eight months have exceeded expectations, and I would not trade every hiccup for a thousand more hours in my girl, Cessna, here."

Faye calmly responded, "I know all of this. What are you trying to say?" Drew shook his head and Faye realized what he was waiting to hear. "Drew, you know that I feel the same way, of course I do." She knew he wanted to ask why she refused to say it and Faye didn't have a straight fabricated reason. "I haven't said the words because they aren't necessary, not for us, and I thought you knew that."

"If I ask you to say them, to start saying them," Drew's voice grew more and more wary, "would you?"

Faye turned and looked out her passenger window and the sky was turning a light indigo and streaks of burnt orange and blush were covering the horizon. "I don't want you to make me say something," she paused and saw another plane below them a thousand feet or so, Faye wondered what was happening in that cockpit, who the pilot of that plane was and why. Faye wondered if it was a couple if they loved each other and if saying the words really mattered enough for Drew to make an ordeal out of it. Then Faye realized she was also making it an ordeal. "But I do" Faye turned back to Drew and caressed his cheek, "Love you. I love you, Drew with everything ounce of paint that runs from my soul to my canvas, I love you."

Drew couldn't contain himself, he pulled Faye into a mind numbing kiss tongue tracing every inch of the inside of her mouth. Drew starting kissing down her neck and his hands wandered down her shoulders

and as he traced the outside of her breasts his mind chirped with a reminder of the time and of his schedule for the night. Drew pulled back taking a few deep breathes and pulling the plane out of the slow spiral dive it had engaged in. Faye herself was flustered and felt as if she had betrayed part of herself, she just wasn't sure which part it was or if it was a part of her she even wanted.

Instead of worrying Faye placed her hand again against Drew's Calvin Klein Jeans and traced soothing patterns on his seem. Drew in turn was preparing for the next part of his flight plane. He checked off every pre- 'flight' item as he lined Faye and himself up with the horizon of the beach and the full blown sunrise in their direct eye sight. They watched in silence for a few hundred feet, then Drew stuck his left hand down into the flight bag that was between his seat and the wall. Drew felt around for the small object stored in the front pocket and as motionlessly as possible Drew slid the ring onto Faye's finger.

Faye to her benefit waited until the ring was firmly in place before she snatched her hand back, she was trying to figure out what her response should turn out as. She stared down at the princess cut ring on her finger and wondered why Drew thought this was what she wanted. She had told him about her past, she had told him about her fear of ending up in a loveless marriage like her parents, and she had cried out of frustration when people told her she would grow into marriage and babies and all things domestic.

Faye turned the ring around her finger before she slide it off and held the weight of it in her palm, "Why?" it was the only question Faye needed to ask. Her response was going to remain the same regardless of the answer, but the way she phrased the rejection could change.

Drew was smiling thinking he had done something right with Faye for the first time in a while. They had stopped talking about the future because it seemed set in stone that at least for the next year while Faye applied to graduate schools she would live with him and they would live in the same bliss they were in now. Drew assumed if Faye was okay living with him and keeping up his apartment while he worked meant that she was growing to the idea of marriage. With these thoughts blazing in the synopsis in Drew's brain he said what he believed she needed to hear.

"I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you and the idea of you as Mrs. Drew Schneider makes me want to jump you right here in my baby girl, which let me tell you is a first for me which makes it a huge deal."

"Uh-huh" Faye again held out the ring in her palm as if testing the weight, instead she was pondering how much velocity it would pick up if she chucked it out of the window.

“Don’t leave me hanging Faye, what do you say?” Drew’s voice grew with each word full of confidence, “Will you marry me?”

“Of course I won’t Drew.” Faye passed the ring back to Drew in a stiff motion. “I never want to get married, so why you would do this” Faye waves her hand around pointing to the plane, the ring, and the sunset, “I have no idea.”

Drew said how he just couldn’t understand how he misread the signs, when Monica was ready for him to propose she moved in with him and was planning their future together. Faye then explained again how she was not Monica and how every women could not and should not be prepared to her. Drew ended up turning the plane around and flying the twenty minutes back to the airport. Faye tried over and over again to explain her views and how Drew’s proposal came off to her, as Drew not knowing who she really is. Drew spent the time replaying the past few months and trying to find a way to make Faye say yes to him before they landed, Drew wanted this story to tell his friends. As Drew called tower and asked permission to land a final time Faye turned to him and started the end of their relationship without realizing it.

“Drew I need to experience a lot of” Faye stumbled trying to find the word and when she failed she settled with, “experiences before I marry you and before I even decide that we are the fairy tale type of soul mates you somehow even at thirty-six believe in.”

“Like what?” Drew lands the plane and the skidding tires and taxi back to the FBO gives Faye the few minutes she needs to come back with,

“I need to do acid with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Two days flew past before Drew brought up his failed proposal again, it happened while he was paying for the Chinese he had ordered and Faye was home with Stella doing a Saw movie marathon. Drew lashed out on the delivery man who was around Faye's age, "You are ready for marriage right? I mean twenty-two isn't young. I married the first time at younger than that, if you loved someone and they asked you'd say yes... right?"

The delivery man fearing for his tip gave a nervous yes in response and Drew felt uplifted enough to pat the man on the back and hand him a ten. Drew took the food inside thinking over the reason why Faye wasn't home with him tonight. Faye said she needed time to think over everything and his agreement to take acid with her. Faye had hoped it would scare him enough to steer away from marrying her, but Drew had agreed to Faye's demand for them to trip together because he understood the intimacy of hallucinating with someone you love.

In Drew's entire life he had taken acid three times, two prior to meeting Faye. The first time Drew was seventeen and it was the last weekend he was spending in Marshall, Michigan. Drew was heading off to college in Ohio for their flight program, his friends who even back then were 'family, were taking it rather hard. Growing up and going to school with the same sixty kids makes for 'family', a few others tried out along the years but they never could understand all the inside jokes and half-finished memories. When Drew was going to be the first of the family to leave Michigan, let alone their little part of it, drugs were the logical choice for their last hoorah. Louis had a friend who went to Michigan State and gave them "the best deal you'll find this close to Chicago."

Louis, Danny, Peter, and Drew all walked into the woods surrounding Danny's house because they had heard that the outdoors was the place to be. On the count of three they all placed the tab of acid on their tongues and for the next several hours they wandered.

Drew stared at a tree that knew his past, for hours, but when he finally touched it, he realized he was laying down without his shirt on. Drew looked around and saw Danny tracing a groove into the ground by doing the same circuit around a bush, and Peter had taken his socks off and was watching them sway in the breeze about him. Louis was acting like Louis, talking to himself about the most transcendent ideas. Drew walked over to Louis knowing within his bones that Louis had something to teach him.

"I admire the no shirt look Drew." Louis had said without any infliction in his voice.

"I don't know where it went." Drew murmured.

"Do you know where it was?"

"On me?" Drew replied.

"Then start there."

"Where?"

"With yourself. Start with yourself and go from there." Louis then turned around and walked what Drew later found out was six miles to the nearest motel. Drew and the family never found out why he went alone, or what he did, Louis never told anyone but he slept for almost two days afterwards, the family assumed it involved a lot of cardio.

Drew thought a lot about what Louis said to him in the woods the first few months while Drew was at college. Drew was in a new place with people who weren't the guys he grew up with and Drew found it hard to adjust. His dorm room floor thought he was a hick from Michigan. When Drew tried out for the golf club team everyone was surprised he knew how to play golf, and they were flabbergasted when he turned out to play better than most of them. Drew's dormmate made fun of the way he said pillow and milk with the long I's. However, Drew thought over and over again about Louis's words and how he needed to start with himself and with that advice he was able to step outside of his discomfort and make college an amazing four years of his life.

Monica though was with Drew the second time he took acid. Monica wanted to act like the cool girlfriend, the flower child instead of the trust fund baby. Drew and Monica took acid together while walking along Ohio State's campus, they laughed at all the people walking by doing mundane activities while they were in another world, a better more complete world. Drew thought the reason Monica loved the experience was because she felt above everyone else without feeling guilty. However, that sense of better than thou is what kept Monica from doing it again.

Drew fell in love with Monica that day, the way she walked with an ancient grace that Drew had never seen outside of movies before. Monica reminded Drew of Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* all elegant and for the first time Monica came off as humble to Drew. Drew remembered sitting against a tree in the middle of the campus and watched Monica curl her toes around a couple blades of grass. Her feet were pale compared to her legs, natural looking. Monica's toe nails were a shiny blue with a single chip missing on her right big toe. Drew always thought it was cute how Monica's second toe was longer than they should

have been, giving her feet a gnarly look, but that day Drew saw truth in Monica's feet. Imperfect as they were they carried her with grace and ease.

Now with Faye telling Drew that she found that the best life altering decisions were made while high, Drew had no qualms with indulging her. All Drew asked was that she waited until his next leave, Drew wanted to have as much time between flying and tripping, he respected the air too much for another different. Faye had told him it would take her a few days to find out who was holding at the moment and when she had some she would come over. It gave her an easy out to postpone the process long enough to allow her time to think.

The fact was, Faye had tripped twice a year every year since she was eighteen. Faye found that it mellowed her out and kept her from feeding into her depression, plus she loved what it did to her art. Faye was behind in her routine because she had not known how Drew would react to her drug use. Now he was giving her a reason but like Drew, Faye knew how intimate it was and she wasn't sure she was ready for that with him, just like she wasn't sure she ever wanted to marry him.

Instead Faye bought a few tabs of acid from her neighbor Rab and picked up a two hundred dollars' worth of red wine and weed. Faye spent three days smoking, drinking, and painting. When Faye on the fourth morning knocked on Stella's door and silently handed her the last of her weed and wine Faye knew she had made her choice. She sent Drew a text saying she would bring dinner that night. Faye still in her Target flannel PJ set, shuffled herself to her mailbox. She separated the mail while walking back inside and when she saw a postage from Spain Faye froze.

Faye had over a year ago applied to several dozen internships, both overseas and national. The programs ranged from art history focus to painting, to teaching English as a second language in cities Faye found artsy. Faye had received a rejection letter from everyone that bothered to send out one. Faye thought maybe it was spam mail, or they letting her know that she could reapply. Faye stood stiff in her kitchen wondering if the safe option was just to throw the letter away unopened. Of course though Faye felt the chance a true life changing experience just a single tear away.

Faye chuckled and thought *of course I will open it*, which she did and it was the letter that did change her life. Instead was a congratulation letter that explained that last year when she applied they were already filled but they loved her application so much they pushed her for early acceptance, in their internship program at The Museo del Prado in the heart of Madrid. She would learn all about the art of Spain, what inspired artist

in Spain, while also learning the main duties of the administration behind the museum. It was for three months May through end of July and it was unpaid. It was not the perfect fit for Faye, but it was still a dream in cream paper. A dream that was coming to Faye in the wake of a proposal.

Faye ran back to Stella's room and after frantically pounding down her door she let herself in and Stella peeked over her covers with a frown on her face. "What, this is the second time today. Just what?"

"I got it!" Faye couldn't stop herself from hopping from one foot to the other in glee. "I got in to the museum internship in Madrid. I can go for three months—unpaid but still three months in Europe!"

Stella hollered congrats and pulled back her covers as an invite and a warning, as happy as she was for Faye it was still early. Faye took the deal, kicked off her slippers, and climbed into bed with Stella. Stella reached for the letter and while she read over it Faye was explaining about how this worried her for her relationship with Drew. Stella thought at this point Drew was doing more changing to Faye than was needed and was ready use this internship as a reason to send Drew packing.

"Sweetie, this is your dream, it isn't perfect but it is better than staying here, what is here for you? Other than friends, which will still hate to wake up before noon when you come home?" Stella asked through a yawn.

"I would have to tell Drew and I know he won't take it well. I mean he supports me and he loves that I paint but it is—" Faye stumbled not wanting to admit her fears in Drew.

"But it is, what?" Stella countered.

"He almost loves my passions as an outsider, ya know? I learn all his pilot terms and I let him teach me to fly, but I asked him to paint with me and he told me 'I love that you paint, it is your thing, and it doesn't have to turn into our thing'." Faye sighed and flopped onto her back stealing the letter back from Stella. "I didn't want it to become *our* thing, I just wanted him to I guess partake in my thing with me, like I do with him."

Stella laced her fingers with Faye lending her silent support. "I say go for it, you will regret not going if the reason is for a guy, a guy you've only known for eight months, who you just said I love you to the other day. A guy who proposed to you, proposed Faye, if he was a person worth losing your dreams to he would have never proposed like then, or now."

Faye nodded, she knew Stella was right but she wasn't ready to lose Drew. Faye wondered if he would wait for her, it was two months away which meant she had to send her reply now and start planning

immediately. Faye was planning on talking about tripping with Drew when he got back from work in two week that night, instead as she laid next to a napping Stella, she planned on how to ask if their relationship was strong enough to last a three month break.

As Faye's mind drifted off she herself wondered if maybe she didn't want a long distance boyfriend when she left. Maybe she wanted to try to date European, maybe she wanted to free herself again. With the image of painting in her smock in all corners of Spain Faye realized that the raven didn't represent anything, the raven was her, Faye and Faye knew she needed to free the raven. The last thought Faye had was maybe Drew would tell her that he wanted to leave her, tonight so she wouldn't have to leave him.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Faye opened Drew's door with her key while balancing the lasagna she had spent the afternoon preparing. Faye's grandma had taught her the best way to break difficult news is over a full and happy stomach. Faye called out for Drew and he peeked out of his room holding up a finger while talking on the phone. Drew was to go to work in the next morning, Faye assumed the phone call was about weather and other job relating issues.

Faye pre-heated the oven and set to work making the spring cocktails she found online. Another word of advice past down to her from her grandmother was a tipsy husband makes for a moldable husband. Faye while she wasn't sure what she wanted out of her relationship with Drew anymore, knew she did not want to end the relationship just yet, it didn't feel finished to her. If she was painting their eight months a few colors and maybe even a few shapes would fail to appear to her, she needed more time to ponder at the picture, Faye needed a few more months at least with Drew.

Drew came out of his room dressed in his under armor sweat pants and a silly batman t-shirt, his hair was messed up from his aggravated hands running through it while he was on the phone. Faye asked about the conversation and Drew told her how he had to go in tomorrow instead of the next day.

"I'll get out a day early too, but I had a plan for tomorrow, I was going to show you what being my fiancé would turn out like, and you know convince you that marriage isn't so bad." Drew laughed at Faye's disgruntled noise. "Obviously I can just do it now."

"Drew, please don't. Here drink some of this it is supposed to taste like spring or something."

"This is very domestic of you, dinner and cocktails. I could get used to this."

Again Faye wondered how much Stella was right about Drew changing her. Faye had no qualms about the domestic life she just wasn't ready for it, nor did she think she ever would want it. Faye bite her tongue in response knowing that what she had to say would go down better if they weren't fighting beforehand. The lasagna had to cook for an hour and a half which left enough time for Drew to drink three drinks and a calming make out session on the couch. When the oven finally beeped and Faye served them both a healthy portion she was ready to start the groundwork of the conversation that was to come.

"Drew you are important to me and I have something to tell you, something that is also important to me." Drew grunted around a mouthful of food, but did give Faye his undivided attention. "I got some crazy

random, and amazing news today.” Again Drew grunted and Faye downed the rest of her drink, a little vodka courage. Drew finished off his last few bites and sighed when he was done.

“Well, I’m stuff that was great babe, so what’s this news?” Faye cringed at the name babe, she still hated pet names of any form.

“I got an internship for over the summer at this amazing art museum. It is almost a perfect fit for me. I got the letter this morning, it is a little last minute, but I emailed them my response and I accepted, I mean how could I not take the space?”

“Where is it at?” Faye mumbled *Spain* and Drew felt the air leave his lungs and realized what the home cooked meal was all about. Drew stands up and swipes the plate onto the floor and Faye jumps when she hears it shatter. “You think buttering me up full of food and booze is going to make me handle this better? You are leaving for who knows how long to Europe without even asking me—”

“Asking you?” Faye’s voice steadily rises in octave as she stands facing Drew. “As in asking you for permission, like you own me? Oh hell no Drew, that is not what our relationship is based on. I took the *three month* internship because it was my choice because it is my life, you don’t have any say in whether or not I go.”

Drew asked sarcastically, “Then why even bother telling me?”

“Are you serious? You might not have a say in if I go, but I didn’t know if you would want to stay with me while I am gone, I wasn’t sure if you were willing to date someone you weren’t going to see for three months. You have a say in whether we keep our relationship going or not.”

Faye did not want this to end them, she felt her hands start to shake and she felt the lasagna churning in her stomach, it felt as if it was thinking about making a reappearance. Faye felt her eyes start to pressurize and she willed herself not to cry, not now not when Drew was acting so out of character, so mean and so harsh.

“Why do I get a say in that if I don’t get in a say in you leaving? I thought we were in this together? I proposed to you, you know how serious I am taking us, why would you think I wouldn’t want a say in you leaving or not?”

“Because you don’t get a say in my personal life, you just get to experience it with me. I would never try and make decisions for you.” Faye tried to explain.

“Three months is a big chunk of time, the courteous path would have been to at least tell me before you accepted. Maybe I would have said something that would have changed your mind.”

“Drew that is why I didn’t tell you. I don’t want you to change my mind, I don’t want to date someone who has that power over me.”

Drew yelled, “You have that power over me.”

Faye countered, “I never asked for that and I don’t want it. If that is what you think love is then you don’t know a single thing about pure undamaging love.”

Drew yelled a stream of words Faye couldn’t distinguish, he then tossed his chair to the floor and stormed into his bedroom. Faye was wrapping her arms around her stomach and shaking, confusion was running all around her. She had never seen Drew act so childlike and it was beginning to scare her. Drew came back in the room and stopped right in front of Faye. Drew’s face had a light sheen of sweat covering it, he was trying to control himself, and Faye could see that in his eyes. Drew got down on one knee and held out that same ring again.

“Marry me and stay here, don’t go to Spain where men will seduce you away from me, stay here marry me and I can support your painting career.” Drew’s voice cracked but he held steady, “You’ll never have to work, just paint. Faye please I endured my family judging me for loving you. I broke off all communication with Monica because of you, I changed my life for you. All I am asking of you is to stay here and pursue your real dreams. I’ll take you to Europe and Spain just the two of us. I have money I can do all of that for you, just marry me, and let me take care of you.”

Faye started crying it was silent at first but by the end of Drew’s speech, she was a full out sobbing, snot leaking, and fist clenching mess. Faye backed away from Drew and tried to count backwards from ten, and then from twenty but when Drew continued to stare at her with his soul all over his face, dripping from his face she couldn’t handle it anymore. Faye dropped down to the floor pulling Drew’s face into her hands and she kissed him on his forehead, cheeks, chin, but never the mouth she couldn’t.

“I’m going, I leave May fourth and I come home end of July, all I need to know is, will you still want me when I come home?”

Faye watched as Drew’s guard came flying up and his eyes became closed off to her. He pulled his head out of her hands and he sat back against the cabinets. It took Drew a few moments to respond and when he did Faye felt an overwhelming sense of dread come over her. “I’m not sure if I even want you for now.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Faye had left Drew's apartment moments after Drew's response, Faye went straight to her car and home without thinking much past the mechanical efforts of driving and navigating herself. Faye spent the first few days avoiding the subject with Stella and Lucy, instead Faye shopped for new secondhand luggage, got her passport renewed, and backed away her few valuables.

After Faye realized a week had passed without a call from Drew she grew worried. Drew had a safe job, at least he liked to inform Faye at least once every two weeks, that flying is the safest mode of travel. Still, Faye wondered how she would even find out if something happened to Drew while he was flying. Faye knew that Monica was still his emergency contact, she had asked him to act as hers when she got a new serving job and then wondered who his was. After much prodding Drew looked over at Faye with an apologetic smile and told her how Monica just knew the most about what medication he could handle and what medication made him worse off. Faye hadn't protested in fact it did make sense but she wondered now if Monica would tell her if something happened, somehow Faye knew that Monica would never tell her.

Three more days slipped away with Faye planning her leave of absence and trying to paint. Faye assumed she was too anxious and stressed from the move, that her lack of paintings was due to her nerves. On the third day though started feeling a more pure emotion slipping into her joints. Every time Faye bent her knees or flicked her wrist she felt angry and by the end of the day she caved and called Drew, seven times. Each time went to voicemail and after the third voicemail she didn't have it in her to leave another. Instead, Faye went to bed and upon waking and discovering that Drew had not called her back, she sent four more calls throughout the day.

Faye kept busy by cleaning the kitchen in a rigorous fashion. Stella after her after work run filled up her water bottle and asked if Faye had heard anything back from Drew. When Faye responded in the negative Stella couldn't stop from thinking how immature and hurtful the silent treatment was. Stella wondered why Faye was belittling herself enough to deal with this treatment from Drew. Stella had talked at length with Lucy about how dependent Faye seemed to act in accordance to Drew. Stella watched as Faye bleached the sink and how two bottles of Pinot Noir were empty, it was only six o'clock, and the bottles were not at their place yesterday. Stella tried to reason with Faye and convince her that this should just act as her breaking point. Leave Drew and enjoy Europe; single, was Stella's advice, but all Faye heard was give up on Drew and hers relationship.

Two weeks finally passed and Faye did not for the first time in six months drive to pick Drew up at the airport, instead she drove to his apartment and let herself in. She refreshed the sheets and dusted the place. Then she lit candles and spent two hours readying herself for Drew. She shaved everywhere, washed and blew out her hair. She put on the brand new lingerie that she had bought the day before. After dressing she put on the light pink lipstick Drew loved and the thigh high stockings that he could never resist. Faye wasn't sure why she was trying to seduce Drew but somehow she knew that if she could get Drew to remember at least how amazing sex was with her, it would not take long to remind him how amazing dating her was too.

At eight twenty seven Faye heard the front door open, the only light in the apartment was from the candles that were still burning all around the apartment. Drew at first was surprised at just the sight of them and then he was surprised that Monica was trying to romanticize him. Drew had spent the two weeks reconnecting with Monica and filling her in on how he thought Faye leaving was the beginning of the end. Drew was a little surprised that by the end of the two weeks Monica was sexting him and they even had phone sex twice. So when Drew walked into his bedroom the words out of his mouth were detrimental.

"Mo—ther of God what are you doing here... Faye?" Drew let a weak laugh escape.

Faye sat up from where she was laying on her right side, she felt in that moment more naked than if she was skinless in front of a judging panel. "I wanted to surprise you and show you I need us to fix us."

Drew dropped his flight bag down and walked over to his closet in order to hang his coat up. Drew was having to stave off in order to calm his beating and erratic heart down. Drew never expected Faye to show up now, he figured in a few days with enough silence she would just call or text him telling him it was over and while Drew was happy it wasn't over he also felt disappointed because the easy out he thought he was making for himself was torn away by Faye's appearance.

"I didn't know you'd even want to see me after everything." Drew stammered out.

Faye scooted off the bed and standing in her lacy bra, thong, and thigh highs she stood in front of Drew and laced both of their hands together. Faye took a deep breath and turned her face up to his. "I don't forgive you for ignoring me for two weeks, in fact we are going to fight about that, and a lot. But right now I want to show you that I am worth fighting for, we are worth fighting for." Faye paused and when Drew made no motion that he was going to respond she squeezed his hands and asked, "Do you want to push me down on that bed and forget what we were fighting about or do you want to ask me to leave? Those are your two options."

Drew didn't speak he just used their laced hands to lead Faye against the bed and pushed her down on it. The whole time Drew spent claiming Faye's body like an imperialistic land does to virgin territory, Faye called out to Drew over and over again, begging him to take her and never leave her again. Faye was tearing herself open to Drew in order to keep any part of him. Drew represented in that moment comfort and adulthood. Faye wanted to in the throws of her climax slap his ring onto her finger and give him anything he wanted as long as he would love her. Faye had forgot how broken and lost she felt without a persons love, without Drew's love.

Faye laid across Drew's rising and sweaty chest and Drew stroked Faye's hair in post love-making confusion. Faye left the next morning with the firm belief that her and Drew were going to end up better than before. While she drove the twenty minutes back to her place Faye felt the bliss from the night before dripping off her skin and leaving her raw and oversensitive. By the time Faye unlocked her front door she was sure she was just overreacting but just in case she called Drew three times willing him to answer. When he finally sent her a text telling her that he just got out of the shower she calmed down. However, Stella was watching the whole exchange and Faye felt her judgment.

"What? I'm just a little paranoid okay." Faye turned away from Stella, "you would act like this too."

"I wouldn't let a man walk all over me, so no I wouldn't and the real authentic Faye doesn't allow a man two ignore her for no reason for two weeks and then fuck him as a reward for him coming home."

Faye whipped around, "I was not rewarding him, I was reminding him."

"Of what?"

"That we were worth fighting for and that he loved me." Faye felt herself grow confused at her own words.

"It seems to me you are putting out in hopes that he doesn't go somewhere else for it." Stella wanted to reach out for Faye when Stella saw how Faye contemplated the idea of Drew cheating.

"Drew is a lot of things but he isn't a cheater...Not really."

"Boo thang, Lucy and I are worried that you are letting yourself get way too caught up in what Drew sees in you. You are changing so much and it hurts me to see him treat you this bad when all you do is try to please him."

Faye scoffed and went to walk past Stella, into her bedroom, and away from the conversation. Stella grabbed Faye's upper arm and before Faye could rip it out of her grasp, Stella said, "Just think of how happy you were a year ago verses now."

"A year ago no one loved me and no one needed me to stay alive."

"Lucy and I do and did and always will. You know we love you." Stella felt her heart chip at the utter indecision in Faye's eyes.

"I want more than that. I deserve a forever love and Drew he is a grown up, ya know? I mean he has a life and family and he wanted me to fit into that. I just wanted everything my mother assumed I would never have. I just want him to love me."

Stella tried to say something uplifting but all that come out was a pathetic *awe boo thang no*. Faye found it condescending and finally made it to her room where she spent the rest of the night, thinking over her life a year ago compared to now, and then wondered what it would look like in just a few short months when she left for Spain. As dependent as Faye was on Drew she was not so much that she was going to give up her dream experience for him or his ignoring and abusive ways.

Lucy and Stella the next morning and several times the next week sat down with Faye trying to explain why how Drew was acting was wrong and hurtful. They were there for Faye but Faye had no interest in anything either one of them had to say. She understood the flaws in her relationship with Drew, but Drew was sorry and Faye and he had talked it over and he had promised to never again ignore her. Even though he had promised the same thing before Faye forced herself to believe him. Faye forced to think that Drew wouldn't leave her, not after she had trusted him with part of her past she had never told a person before. Faye knew that Drew and she were bonded and that if he was going to leave her, he had at least enough respect for their love to do it in a decent mature way. She never thought that Drew would end up as anything other than her grave neighbor in a cemetery one day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

On the Wednesday following Drew's and Faye's reuniting Drew received a text from Monica with her asking if she could swing by. Drew of course checked what Faye had planned for the next few hours, Drew was not planning on actually cheating on her but if Monica wanted to come over as friends Drew thought it would go over the best if he told Monica in person that Faye and himself were back on. Drew then sent back to Monica a smiley face telling her to come over sooner rather than later.

When she arrived Monica was unsure what her exact expectations were. She had felt over the last two weeks reawakened to what loving Drew had felt like. They had joked about high school and her lack of talent for not falling for the latest fade. They had migrated to old marriage stories that only they knew, inside jokes that both could never fully forget. With the last few nights rolling over into the danger category of asking what if questions and husky voices turning into moans which turned into descriptions of their best nights together.

Drew made Monica a glass of wine and himself a whiskey sour, they stood across the breakfast bar sipping their drinks and not making eye contact. At last Monica gulped down her glass and placed it with a practiced ease back onto the counter and strutted herself around the bar and in front of Drew. She pushed herself onto him and she felt Drew's eyes dress her down. To Monica it felt as if Drew was unraveling her pencil skirt and searing off her Tom Hardy blouse. Instead Drew clamped his hands around her ass and pushed her more firmly against himself. Monica could feel his erection and she smiled with the knowledge that he still found her desirable, even after dating a twenty year old.

Before Monica even let Drew try to kiss her she stated, "I still love you and I don't think I will ever stop. I want you to know that I am not here for an easy lay, I am here because I want to give us a try again."

Drew felt ice sizzle down his spin and settle in his sacrum. Drew wanted to make things work with Faye, at least before this moment he thought he did. Drew had left Monica for a hundred of reasons, the last falling on the fact she claimed she wanted kids and he refused to give them to her. Drew remembered while looking into Monica's giant wanting eyes their last married fight.

"You'd make a great dad, Drew." Monica called out over her shoulder while she read over the mail.

"I'm not worried about how fucked up I'd make our kids Mon." Drew responded while reading over the latest plane crash article in Huffington Post.

"Then what is it? This is all I want, all I have ever wanted!" Monica flung back at Drew.

“Funny because I thought last year all you ‘ever wanted’ was for me to get that pay raise, so we could go to Hawaii in the winter. I thought the year before that all you ‘ever wanted’ was for us to find a bigger house. Sounds to me you’ve ‘ever wanted’ a lot of things.”

“How dare you compare my need for a child, to those *wants*, needs and wants Andrew are two different things.”

Drew sighed and closed his laptop, he turned to Monica and as nice but firm as he could he said, “I am not having kids Monica, end of discussion.”

Monica’s voice rang out shrilly, “Why!”

“I don’t have to have a reason, I can simply not want them.”

“No, something as important as children always has to have a reason, don’t you want to see a little version of me running around?” Monica pleaded.

“If I say yes you are going to think you have a foothold in this conversation. If I say no I sound like a heartless jerk, don’t paint me in that corner.”

“I don’t see why you can’t have an open mind about this. We are coming up to an age where I won’t be able to have children. Then when you roll over at night and whisper how you wish you had a little boy to teach to play golf with, we will have limited options.”

“Monica, I promise that will not happen.”

“But what if it does.” Monica placed her hands on her hips thinking she won the agreement.

“No.”

“Drew! Don’t turn away from me. Why are you rubbing your temples, am I giving you a migraine? Are you serious Drew? Don’t make that noise at me. How dare you tell me to relax! All I want to know is why you don’t want me to have your children?”

Drew remembered how Monica cried then, giant crocodile tears and how her eyes looking up at him now were similar to then. Monica didn’t want children back then and Drew wondered if she even wanted him now or if she was just giving him the same routine he was used to. Monica brought up kids back then because she was bored and she saw others having them and thought it was her turn for all that attention. Drew remembered reaching out for her back then and she had pushed him away asking why he wouldn’t even consider it and he had told her he would rather live his life the fullest and happiest he could with minimal responsibility. Drew didn’t want to give up vacations or time or money for a child and he told Monica then

that a child wasn't going to make her happy. It turned out that Drew also wasn't going to make her happy and she used the fight about children as her excuse to file for divorce while maintaining the high ground.

Now he had grabbed for Monica again but she wasn't pushing him away, she wasn't calling him a selfish asshole. Instead she was asking him for a second chance at what they had spent most of their lives achieving and it was a sense of mutual satisfaction, not love. "I won't leave Faye for you, not now."

"I know, just kiss me." Drew did for many minutes until he needed to pull away for oxygen and in that moment Drew knew that his actions were wrong and selfish, they always were. Monica left asking him to think about how that kiss made him feel and why he should want to kiss her again.

Instead Drew goes to his phone and tries to call Louis but his phone is disconnect and Drew remembers he is still dark side. Drew wonders who he should call next, Danny or Peter. He knows that Peter has recently gotten over his Monica affliction but doesn't know how deep that really runs so Drew dials for Danny. It rings several times before to Drew's shock Shania answers with a chirpy hello. Drew spends a few moments asking how she has been and when she asks if he would like to talk to Peter, as if it was not Danny's house he called, Drew has no choice but to say yes.

Peter picks up the receiver and shouts a hearty hello and wonders why Drew is calling to talk to him here of all places. Drew doesn't want to tell Peter about Monica but after five minutes of ideal chit-chat Drew realizes that even if he tells Danny, Danny is going to tell Peter. Drew then goes into as little detail as possible while outlining his and Faye's latest fight, his two weeks of radio silence, how he reconnected with Monica, and then Faye, and finally how Monica came to him and asked him to kiss her.

"Did you kiss her?"

"Of course, this is Monica."

"You do realize you cheated on Faye, right?" Peter asked.

"I don't think it counts since it is my ex-wife Pete, I mean I didn't sleep with her or even think about it. It was a simple kiss and if I swear to myself it won't happen again do I need to tell Faye?"

"Why did you even leave Monica if you were going to always go back to her?"

"Don't start that Pete, you always get so angry when I talk about her. I thought you were over her? Can't we just talk about how I might or might not lose Faye, my sexy, kind, new age, and young girlfriend because my ex keeps sinking her fangs back into me? I'm freaking out here Pete, I don't know what to do or which way is up!"

Peter realized in that moment that Drew wasn't calling for him he was calling for Danny. Peter was sure if Shania hadn't answered the phone Drew would never have told Peter and he might have even made Danny swear never to tell either. Peter had held a grudge against Drew, because of Monica, for years but he still loved him like a brother, they were family. Now though as Drew told him how he didn't think it was worth telling Faye, Peter realized he lost all respect for Drew. Even today when Danny called and invited him over for a cook out Peter wanted to say no, because he hated how Danny and Abby had treated Faye, Peter didn't believe she deserved that, as jealous as Peter might have been over Drew and Monica he still was able to see what Danny did as wrong. Also, Louis had yet to come home to anyone but Drew for some reason and Peter felt that maybe his ties to his family should sever and maybe he should call Shania and his son his real family, finally.

"Drew I think you should tell Faye, she deserves to know the truth, and maybe you should take this as a sign that you should let her go? Maybe you should just...grow up, but I have to get off though Shania needs me. See you around sometime Drew." Drew listened to the line go dead and Drew didn't realize it yet, but this was the last conversation he would have with Peter.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Faye refolds her silk pajama bottoms for the fourth time wondering to herself if she should pack anything sexy for skype sessions with Drew, or if she packs something sexy will she want to show them to the locals. Faye thought at first Drew and she would end up okay then he went back to work and only called her three times in three weeks and she felt herself go into overanalyzing mode again. Lucy and Stella tried to talk to her about it again but then stopped even asking her how things were going. Now they avoid all subject of Drew and Faye was ashamed to admit how hard it was getting to love someone who your best friends hated.

Faye was leaving in two days and Drew was coming over to take her to the airport the day of until then she asked for time to spend with her friends and they had drank and cried and talked about how jealous and excited they are for Faye. Faye had painted each of them that night a drunk rendition of how boring the summer was going to turn out as without her. It ended up turning out as a more abstract painting style.

“It looks like those painting elephants do with their trunks!” Stella had snorted out.

“I at least think it looks like a chimp did them, see I’m the nicer friend,” Lucy commented while trying to hold onto a straight face, “so bring me back the best gifts, or a built Spanish husband.”

It was a wonderful few days and it felt like months had passed without Faye and her friends really having fun together, she couldn’t remember why it stopped but her gut squeezed up when she wondered if it started with Drew. Faye had that same thought running through her mind as Drew packed up the back of his car with her suitcases and even as they spoke about what she was most excited for she wondered if she should have had Stella or Lucy take her to the airport.

“Gate four right?” Faye nodded her head. “Want me to walk you in, or what?” When Faye made no move to get out or speak Drew sighed and turned his car off. “What is it? Are you going to tell me not to wait for you?”

“No, I just waiting for me is okay I’m so young a few months doesn’t matter but doesn’t it bother you. Am I asking for something that makes me selfish?”

“Aw babe, don’t be like this. I am going to come and get you when you come home and we will start back up right were we left off. Plus I am going to skype the shit out of you.” Drew traces his thumb down her cheek, “don’t worry so much it ages you.”

“I just want us to finally get back to good.” Faye whispered.

“I love you, I won’t let you fade away from me, and I am yours as much as you are mine.”

“Promise? You promise you’ll still love me and want me when I come home?”

Drew leaned in and gave her a chaste kiss, “I promise. You are always going to act as my co-pilot.”

Faye smiled and felt for the first time in months that she could leave and come back to him and it would all work out. Faye was feeling optimistic and at peace where she was leaving their relationship as she kissed him goodbye in the airport. Then as the plane rose into the air and she thought about she wouldn’t understand what flaps in a plane did, or the rudder she smiled and realized she loved Drew too. Even though she had only said it a handful of times she did and she was happy they were going to make it work. Faye also thought again that maybe marrying Drew wouldn’t make her unhappy, maybe Drew was really the key to a forever happiness that Faye had stopped believing in a long time ago.

Faye kept that happiness for two months of her journey as she laughed over skype with her friends and Drew. Faye planned on how she would tell Drew to propose again and she even started to plan a small intimate wedding. Then Drew started missing skype calls and she didn’t care, she didn’t want to call him either. Faye wasn’t looking for Spaniards or one night stands, instead she was exploring art and experiences. Faye knew Drew would show up at the airport when she came home and if that thought made her feel better about her not turning on skype everyday then Faye thought after everything Drew put her through that was her right.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Louis found himself in a lackluster bar bathroom staring at the grey linoleum after staring at porcelain for fifteen minutes. He knew the bartender took his phone and called Drew when Louis pulled up his number. For now Louis could only think about the blood that he had walked into on his last active day of duty. His boss was giving him two weeks of unofficial time off before his psyche evaluation. If Louis passed his evaluation he would have his regular leave given to him, if he failed, well Louis didn't want to think about that. Instead Louis knowing it was a horrible idea pulled out the flask from his shoe and took two healthy swigs.

Louis waited and drank the rest of his flask before Drew slide into the bathroom. Drew looked down at the slumped over and half conscious Louis with a disappointed frown. "Thought you were done drinking. What happened to the sober Louis that came home last time?"

"That Louis had a girl to protect and now I failed and that girl don't need me, or anyone, cause she need no one. Dead. Drew, she died on me. Well she died because of me. Killed herself ya know." Then Louis rolled over and let the vodka from his flask reenter the world and Drew held his shoulders still as Louis dry heaved.

Drew let Louis sit on the floor for two more minutes, allowing his stomach to settle, and then Drew heaved up his best friend and carried him out of the bathroom. He put down a fifty on the bar as a sorry for the puke and eventually shoved Louis in the backseat of his car. "If you puke in here man, I am letting it crust and then you are going to clean it up, without gloves."

Louis didn't stir until Drew pulled into his parking lot. It was moments like this, which Drew wished he could call Danny. Louis was heavy and Danny always knew how to handle his drunk spells, always did even in high school. Drew figured that it must have helped with the relationship Danny had with Louis, but now on his own, Drew felt ill prepared. Drew had spent the fifteen minute drive thinking over what Louis had babbled about. If this girl really was dead, it wasn't going to be the first Louis had lost, at least Drew thought as much. Then again Drew had wondered why she felt the need to commit suicide. If Drew's timeline was correct Louis only had another month on the job before he could come home. What would make her kill herself this close to the end, this close to freedom, Drew wondered.

Drew carried Louis up to his spare bedroom and it reminded him of Faye and how well Louis and Faye had got along and how ridiculous himself had acted. Drew smiled thinking that at least now Faye and

he seemed to be on the right track, even if she was across the world from him. Louis stirred enough to burp when he was placed on the bed but after that slept till one the next afternoon.

Drew greeted him with oatmeal and coffee both of which Louis greeted like an old friend. Drew watches Louis for a few moments before Louis looked up at him. “Are you going to tell me what that was about?” When Louis shrugs his shoulders Drew said, “You can tell me, I am not going to judge you, I just don’t want you to turn into your father.”

Louis rubs his temples and his whole body aches from the puking the night before and yet he still wants to rummage through Drew’s cabinets for any alcohol, any form of release from his mindful torment. “I lost someone and I didn’t see it coming—or I did but I ignored it thinking she was strong enough to see the light at the end of the tunnel.”

“You said as much last night. How did she kill herself?”

Louis didn’t look up, “I went in to check in on her one night and found an empty bottle of Jameson Gold Reserve—figured she wanted to splurge for her last meal. I found a note telling me to retrieve her body at this hotel that was a few blocks away.” Louis felt his voice start to shake and he cleared his throat while pressing his thumbs into his eyes. “I don’t know if she walked drunk to the hotel or got a cab I was in the town setting up her job for most of the day, I had told her not to leave so I assumed she would listen. Then I realized she had planned this for months. She was depressed Drew, she was supposed to go into witness protection with her boyfriend but as the trial tore them up it spit them out as separate people. Samson took Xavier and I took Heather instead of us all going in it together. It was Xavier’s choice he couldn’t stand Heather by the end of it, trauma does that to most people and well I wasn’t surprised but it destroyed Heather. So when I read her note I knew that I had acted so ignorant. I wanted to think I was enough to save her, we had long talks every night about her new life and she seemed so much happier those last few days, but even that is a sign. I told her about Danny even, well vaguely and she gave me a few things she still had of Xavier and asked me to burn them with Danny’s things for both of us.”

“Did you find her in the hotel?” Drew’s voice was only a whisper in the room.

“I was so distraught that drove as fast as I could to the hotel and almost killed the clerk for her room number and then I kicked down the door when it was locked.” Louis let out a bitter laugh. “She was laying on the bed with her wrist cut and the blood pooled around her. The whiskey made her hands shake and she didn’t have two clean cuts on her wrist but about three on each, she kept getting it wrong she was too drunk.

It wasn't quick for her and it wasn't painless, she was in agony for several minutes and had I done my job better I would have found her. I killed her by failing her."

Drew watched as Louis let the tears break out of his soul and onto the countertop. Drew saw as Louis's foundations shattered and his friend while physically was sitting in front of him seemed to have lost chunks of his self in the past few days. Drew realized that he didn't know when Louis really got on leave, but it wasn't yesterday. By the bags under his eyes Drew knew Louis had not slept in a decent bed in several days and by the haggard look in his cheeks he couldn't tell when Louis had a full meal either.

"Buddy, when did you get to come home?"

"A week and a half ago. I've spent most of it here in Grand Rapids, but I couldn't call anyone. I didn't deserve saving I just wanted to drink away the pain, like Heather did."

Drew let out a pissed moan and wondered how Danny could leave Louis when he was like this. Granted Drew assumed Danny didn't actually know but Danny knew this could always happen with Louis and even if friendship was all Louis wanted why couldn't Danny give it to him?

The next week flew by and Drew felt awful at the end of it when he realized he missed all three of his and Faye's usual skype dates. Drew had missed several the weeks before but never every single one straight. Drew assumed he could just explain and Faye would forgive him, it was Louis after all and Faye had a soft spot for him. Drew in that week had to dump out all of his booze after coming home twice, once from the grocery store, and the second time from his dentist appointment, just to find Louis passed out drunk in his living room.

Drew tried reasoning with Louis but Louis was never willing to hear him out. He would claim that he was going to stop drinking that day and he seemed so sincere that Drew would feel safe leaving for whatever he had to do that day and without fail, even after dumping out his own stash, he would come home to find Louis on his way to a drunk oblivion. Drew was at his wit's end and did the only logical thing he could think of, he called Danny. After a few minutes of explaining the situation Danny agreed to stop by the next day and asked Drew to give them privacy and Drew frankly was glad for it. If Louis wasn't passed out he was drunk crying or screaming from his nightmares, or his failings as Louis would blabber out.

Drew greeted Danny in the parking lot and asked him to try and be gentle and Drew wondered if Danny knew that he knew. However, as Danny entered Drew's apartment Danny wondered how Louis hadn't even once called him. Louis was malnourished and Danny could feel Louis's cheekbones cutting him

from the couch. Drew sighed as Louis snored in his sleep. Drew had said that Louis hadn't started drinking yet, in fact he hadn't started his day yet either. Danny was happy with that, thinking that at least he would have a half sober Louis to talk to, hungover yes, but also mostly sober, and Danny would take that.

Danny shook Louis awake and Louis started when he saw Danny leaning over him. "What are you doing—Drew called you, of course." Louis sat up and forced himself not to think about how repulsive Danny must find him in this moment.

"Drew was worried about you and he wasn't making any progress and he was thinking maybe I could. Don't get all angry with him, you have drunk yourself into a stupor every day since getting here and Drew had every right to call on the family for help." Danny told him.

"You are not my family, you've made that clear." Louis tried to get up but the floor was trying to kiss his face, Danny caught him and pushed Louis back on the couch.

"Regardless you are my family and Drew filled me in on your loss. I am sorry Louis, so sorry." Louis turned his head and glanced at Danny and from this angle Danny looked sincere.

"I didn't mean to fail, I tried so hard to reason with her, to make her see that Xavier leaving was a great new beginning for her too, and I really thought she was starting to see it that way too. I was wrong. I was blind. I was everything I was trained not to be, I failed." Louis dropped his head onto Danny's shoulder and Danny felt the part of himself that seemed hollow for so long fill up. Louis was what Danny was missing and in this moment Danny needed all the Louis he could get.

Louis felt Danny's hands trace down his spine and it raised goosebumps all over him. Danny whispered sweet nothings in his ear which led to Danny tracing his lips down his ear and then on Louis's neck. Louis leaned back with a questioning look on his face and Danny said, "I can give you this, let me make you feel better." Louis wanted to push him away, Louis wished he had the strength to tell Danny that he was worth more than what he was offering. But Danny was offering himself up to Louis and Louis was broken and bleeding from his seams, he needed Danny to hold him together. Louis opened his mouth for Danny and Danny slide his tongue in and for the next hour both men re-found each other.

Danny rolled off the couch and entered the bathroom, he poured a hefty handful of coconut scented soap on his hand and he scrubbed down his hands, arms, and even rubbed it into his stubble on his cheeks. He needed every trace of Louis off of him before he went home to Abby, he swore to himself he wasn't going to do this to her again. Danny contemplated getting in the shower but Drew had already been out for

almost two hours and Danny wasn't sure when he would swing back in. Louis choose that moment to stumble in behind Danny and wrap his arms around Danny's bare chest. Louis placed a hot and lazy kiss on Danny's left shoulder blade while smiling. Louis thought that even if Danny demanded they go back to how they were then he could move on because at least he would know Danny cared.

Danny felt himself grow excited again, without the excitement of before the sensation disgusted him, and Danny tore himself out of Louis's embrace. Danny backed out of the bathroom while trying not to feed into the hormones pumping in his veins. Louis looked on confused and worried. Danny, once he had a few feet between himself and Louis felt safe, he found his voice, and put an end to their rendezvous. Danny held out his hands and Louis felt himself panic at the motion.

"Danny, what is it what's wrong? Is it because we are at Drew's? I swear he won't mind, I mean he already knows about us, he found out months ago and he wasn't shocked by it. Drew handled it fine, so why can't you?" Louis watched in horror as all the color drained out of Danny's face and Danny felt the room start to spin.

"What do you mean, Drew is okay with it? Why did you tell him, it was our secret?"

"It was a secret for over twenty years, are you really surprised he found out, and I think he actually started to suspect something was up between us after New Year's."

"Don't bring up New Year's."

Louis flinched, he was so sick and tired of Danny not admitting to what he did and how he acted.

Louis got right in front of Danny's face, a hair breadth away and asked, "What? You don't want to talk about how the only time I tried to come out to the family you freaked out. How I brought a guy to the bar on New Year's, and you took one look at us holding hands and punch him in the face." Louis's voice rose to the point of shouting, "How you then took me into the bathroom and laid a claim on me. You marked me that night, you ravaged me to the point where I was a husk without you inside of me. That night Danny you claimed my heart and it started our eleven year affair. New Year's Danny is when you told me you were gay! You held me afterwards on that grimy bathroom floor and cried." Danny was pacing through the kitchen and muttering for Louis to stop. Louis continued with a softer voice, "Danny you took me in your arms and cried while asking—no begging, pleading for me to never let any else ever have me, and I never did, still haven't. It was always just you for me."

Louis's voice tailed off and he waited for Danny to say anything. They had spent years talking around the subject of what they are, Louis was home so seldom and Danny always gave all he could, and Louis had never felt as empty as he did this last year without Danny. Louis reached out for Danny lightly touching his hand to Danny's fingers, and with that touch Danny whipped his head up and glared at Louis.

"Don't presume that you can touch me. I told you not to talk about that night."

"Are you saying it was a mistake? I don't think even you can lie to yourself that much." Louis wanted to reach out for Danny again, he was shifting his eyes and twitching, and Danny in essence was feeling vulnerable and lost.

"I don't think about that day, I don't think about you with others, and I don't think about you as mine; not really."

Louis took a giant step and replaced the distance with his body, "Look at me Danny." Danny did with effort, his eyes were watery and scared. Louis felt his sentence die in his throat. "I...what do you want from us Danny. Haven't we pretended long enough? You can have a life that allows for us to love each other, we can have that now." Louis pleaded with everything he had to get Danny to accept him and with one last effort he smashed his lips into Danny's and let everything he felt, ever dreamed to feel, and all the pain and love through that brief kiss.

Danny pulled away and Louis saw the walls behind Danny's eyes slide up. "No I don't want you like that Louis, earlier was a mistake, the last eleven—twenty years has never felt right to me. We are over, don't contact me, and don't you dare even think about telling Abby anything that you think went on between us."

"Danny wait, what are you talking about? It doesn't have to end up like this, not anymore." Louis felt himself shattering at Danny's feet.

"I am not *gay* like you Louis. And I don't want a drunk in my life. Sober up, straighten up, and then maybe we can talk about having a friendship."

"Danny no..." Louis voice croaked out. "Please...stop."

Danny's voice was cold and sharp, as if his words were an ice pick and he was chiseling himself out of Louis. "Let go of me Louis, I will hurt you if you make me." Louis dropped Danny's arm as if it burned him. "Fix your life Louis and stop blaming me for your problems. I never promised to be with you. Just stop

pretending I ever felt anything for you. You were an experiment I allowed to go on for too long. Now you are my biggest regret.”

Louis watched in a stunned silence as Danny grabbed his coat, plaid shirt, shoes, and walked towards the door. Before he opened the door Danny turned around and with fresh tear tracks lining his cheeks flung back, “I think you’ve finally made me hate you Louis, so thanks for that. . . Bud.”

The door clicked shut and Louis lunged toward it and when he opened it he was sure he was going to find Danny freaking out in the hallway, Louis felt that he would talk Danny back inside, and he could fix them. When Louis looked into the hallway he did not see Danny and let out an anguished sob, feeling infinitely small, Louis closed the door and placing both of his hands on the cold door he let his head fall down and felt himself empty out, all feelings, all memories, all hopes and wishes were going. They were more than Louis could handle and he relished in the feeling of numbness that worked its way from his eyes down to his toes. Louis could survive if he felt like this, the numbness was welcomed and Louis wanted to relish in it, and he did.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Drew knocked on Danny's front door, a week had passed since Danny came to Drew's aid and Louis had just gotten worse. Drew wanted to ask Danny what he said to Louis since Louis had spent every day finding new creative ways to slip passed Drew and buy booze. Had Drew known that Danny would have done more damage to Louis he would never have begged him to come over. Drew just felt his family life crumbling around him. Peter was non-existent these days, Louis was a drunk mess, Monica was acting all crazy and confusing, and now Danny was giving him the cold shoulder.

Danny finally answered the door and was less than surprised to see Drew, he didn't say a word when he held the door open for Drew to enter. Drew followed Danny back into the dining room, where Drew saw the table was made and had dinner waiting for Danny. Danny asked if Drew would like to join him for dinner.

"Where is Abby? The kids?"

"Outside, I was busy today, came home late, and so they ate without me."

Drew helped himself to some chicken casserole and corn. He sat across from Danny and after a few mouthfuls put his fork down and asked, "What happened between Louis and you? He hasn't stopped drinking since you left."

Danny kept eating and chose not answer, "When does Faye come back?" Drew gave him a stern glare and raised his eyebrow in a challenge. "Fine, we just had the same argument we've had for years, so I told Louis that I couldn't watch him drink his life away, and honestly Drew I don't think it concerns you."

"He is staying with me and I have the right to know what happened, plus we are family. Aren't we?" Drew felt his right leg bounce up and down in anticipation. For Drew, losing his family was his ultimate fear, he would do almost anything to keep his family together.

"As of late Drew I don't think we can really call ourselves a family."

Just then Abigail rounded the corner and smiled gaily at them both. Abigail had heard part of their conversation and she couldn't help but wonder if the reason for their family falling apart was Faye. Abigail had always said she thought Faye was a bad influence on Drew, all Abigail wanted was Monica back in her daily fold. She decided to take matters in her own hands and show Drew how ridiculous dating a child, a child who is across the globe, was.

“Drew how long has passed since you ate with us last? Does that girl of yours keep you all to herself, is she afraid we will knock some sense into you.” Abigail laughed and sipped from her mason jar.

“No Abby she doesn’t care if I came over, we have just felt inclined to enjoy our time together before she left.”

“Right, right, to Europe, and all alone seems a little scandalous to me.”

“This isn’t a Soap opera.”

“We will just have to try to have the two of you over when she gets home, I mean if she comes home.”

“Why wouldn’t she come home Abby.” Drew felt himself grow hot and his fist clenched around the denim of his jeans.

Abigail tossed her hair and looked gleefully at Drew, “Well if it was *me* I am sure going to enjoy my time overseas and maybe even find a man or two to keep me company. Not now of course I’m married with kids, but Faye she’s young and naïve.”

“Shut up Abby, Faye isn’t going to act like that.”

Danny spoke up and told Drew to act civilized and Drew realized this is how Faye had felt that first time ever meeting his family. Drew knew Faye would never cheat on him it wasn’t even a remote possibility and had Abigail gave getting to know her a real try she would know that about Faye too. Drew looked from Abigail to Danny and noticed how desperate Abigail was acting, she wanted any of Danny’s attention and he was giving her none. Drew realized that Abigail had no idea that her husband was gay or at least bisexual. Danny’s indifference for Abigail was not hatred or even out of malice, rather it was an emotion that went some much deeper.

Drew excused himself from the table and went to Danny’s backyard, hoping that Danny would follow, and Drew did not have to wait long. Drew realized that Danny was unable to give Abigail attention because she reminded him, whether Danny was conscious of it or not, of what Danny chose, and how unhappy that choice had made him. Here was one of his best friends and he was living a false life, a dead and pointless life, unfulfilled because he refused to let himself have the soul he loved.

“Is it the drinking that made you push Louis away or is it because he still loves you and wanted you to leave Abby for him?”

Danny sat down on last porch step with his elbows on his knees and head in his hands said, "He told me you knew."

"I know and I don't care, makes a lot of sense, and that is what I told him months ago. I'm pissed you never told me, but I'm more pissed thinking that you love him and are abandoning him."

"My family is Abby and our kids, Louis wants me to give that up for him, I won't. I'm not gay. Louis thinks we have this love affair going on, we don't all we have was at one point sex, and I regret every time I let him have me." Danny's voice was dead but firm as he continued, "I thought we could just act like friends that we were mature enough for that, but now with his drinking, I can't have that around my kids, and I shouldn't have to look like the bad guy for saying that."

Drew turned his head away from Danny in disgust, "I know it isn't the drinking, you love Louis, and you are too much of a coward to accept your true self." Drew stood up, "I pity you Danny and I pity your family for having a lackluster husband and father."

Danny stood straight up and punched Drew right across the temple, sending Drew staggering to the grass below them. Drew stood up disoriented but ready to strike back. Drew sees the color leave Danny's face and he backs away and before he can flee inside Drew calls out just shy of yelling, "Is it the drinking that you don't want around your family or are you afraid your kids will call you out!"

"Fuck you Drew, you don't understand my life, go home and tell Louis that neither of you are welcome back." Danny slams the door shut and Drew walked himself back to his car where he sat calmly for a few minutes before the grief overwhelmed him and he screamed and beat his head and hands against his steering wheel and car dash. Drew felt himself suffocating and he backed up out of the driveway with unshed tears blurring his vision and a curse on his lips hoping that Danny never felt full happiness.

Chapter Thirty

“Lucy come on Faye is finally calling! Hurry UP.” Stella called across her apartment. Lucy sprinted back into the living room with a bowl of popcorn in one hand and a candy bar in the other. After a few beeps from the laptop that was propped up on the coffee table Faye’s face filled the screen. All three friends screamed across thousands of miles with pure joy of seeing each other after a few weeks of zero communication.

“Faye! Man why did you have to drop off the face of the Earth, we were having withdrawals, we were used to living through you.” Lucy laughed.

“Guys, shit got crazy out here I just decided to embrace the experience and emerge myself in the culture and skypping took away from that. Before you get all pissy I haven’t talked to Drew either, or yet, you two were my first call.” Faye smiled and Lucy noticed how happy and at ease Faye was.

“Tell us all about it and why you haven’t felt the need to call Drew, not that we are complaining.” Stella added.

“Well it all started with a Hooters and a birthday party...” Faye explained how a girl she worked with was turning twenty—one and that wasn’t a huge deal for them, but it was to Faye. Faye remembered how much she didn’t remember from her twenty-first birthday and wanted to give that to this girl. “They can drink at sixteen here, and well before then parents can buy it for them, so drinking isn’t seen as this extreme thing, which is amazing. It really makes for mature youths.” Faye went on to say how she found the most American place she could and it happened to fall onto Hooters, “Can you believe it a Hooters in Europe, what is the point you ask?” The point was for American’s like Faye to see it and demand to give all her knew friends the *real* cultural experience of a birthday at Hooters, giant balloon boobs, and all. “It was amazing she got right up on the chair with the balloons tied around her own large chest, and the waitresses sang the birthday song in Spanish. Then she hooted like an owl and flapped her menu wings. We all laughed and I realized in that moment I was losing so much of my experience by always calling home and directly relaying it to everyone, the stories would lose a lot of their charm that way. Which is why now don’t get mad but I’m extended my stay another month. So instead of end of July, I’ll be home end of August.”

The line was silent for a few heartbeats, when Stella broke it with a violent laugh and punched Lucy in the arm, “Told you she wasn’t coming home on time, pay up!”

Lucy grunted, rubbed her upper arm, and pulled out a twenty from her purse. “Way to cost me a decent dinner Faye.”

“You two bet on this? You know, I’m not even shocked.” Faye spent the next twenty minutes telling them other small stories about how she went to her first bull riding show, “I felt like Hemmingway and I realized why I hated reading him in high school, all I saw was the brutality in bull fighting then, now the passion these men have for fighting these bulls is breathtaking, it is true love. Love that fills them to the brim and makes them forget about death and decay, instead they see only life and only the sparkling, bursting moment, that they exist in and it thrilled me to partake in such an exploration of divinity.”

Stella and Lucy listened to Faye’s stories hearing how her voice was soft but passionate so much like it used to sound, they realized she was replacing Drew with her experiences in Spain and they were happy for her. They were willing to see and hear less of her if Faye returned without the need for Drew she had left with.

“When are you going to tell Drew about your new plans?” Lucy asked after they switched to more personal topics.

“Tonight when I call him, so tomorrow morning your time I think.”

“How do you think he will handle it?” Lucy asked.

Faye dipped her head down and placed her thumb nail in her mouth and started chewing on it, “Well not well I imagine.”

“Do you want him to still wait for you?” Stella asked in a hushed whisper.

Faye tilted her head on screen and let out a painful sigh. “A month ago I could have answered with a firm: yes. Now? Man I have no idea, I care for him but I haven’t missed him in the way I thought I would. At first it was over powering how much I wanted to come home, to him. Then time went by and I couldn’t figure out what to tell people when they asked why I dealt with dating an older guy who wasn’t all that nice to me. He loves me is all I could say, and as much as I want to be loved, don’t I deserve respect too?”

“You do boo thang you do. So tell me are you going to leave him?” Stella asked hoping for a yes.

“I just don’t know at this point what I will do when I get home, I won’t leave him over skype he deserves better than that.”

In fact when Faye skyped Drew that night for her she wondered if it wouldn’t just end up as a clean break if she left him now and spent another month oversees, giving Drew no choice but to get over her.

However, when Drew answered the skype call with the biggest grin stretching his cheeks Faye couldn't help but smile back. They shared joyous hellos and swapped stories for hours, until Faye remembered why she Skyped him. She let him finish telling her about Louis and how he thinks he might have found the cure to keep him from drinking, Drew just had to keep him busy and so tired that Louis forgot to drink that day. Then Drew launched into his fears with going back to work and leaving Louis alone.

"What if he ends up in some crazy unsafe situation and I can't come get his sorry ass? He has started some crazy bar fights these last few weeks, I wouldn't put it past him to take full advantage of me leaving. I would call his partner Samson but I can't reach him yet, he is still off the grid for another month or so. I'll be very happy to have you back home to watch him for me when I'm gone, he really feels connected to you, which is good, and honestly Faye, my family is falling apart I could really use your help in holding what is left of it together."

Drew sounded raw and tired at the end. Faye tried to slow her tongue down but fear and loathing for Drew assuming she would just give up her life to watch his friend made the words fly out of her. "I'm staying longer, in Spain I mean."

Drew closed his eyes and the tips of his ears turned red. "How long? What? A month? Jesus Faye, why even bother coming home at this point?"

"Hey, it is only four more weeks, it won't feel like much longer."

"I just told you I need you here and then you say you are staying, why didn't you start off the conversation with that?"

"I didn't want to fight, I've missed you so much, and we were talking like we used to and I love it. I didn't want it to end ok?"

"Well it is ending and maybe we should end things to, don't you think?"

Faye panicked, breaking up was suddenly the exact opposite of what Faye wanted. "Don't abandon me, I'll come home, it is only a few weeks. Please Drew don't leave me over Skype. Allow me to see you face to face, you'll see how much we still love each other. Long distance is hard for anyone, we knew that going into this, how hard it was going to be." Faye was speaking gradually faster and faster, she wasn't sure Drew could even follow what she was saying, she just needed the chance to say anything that would make Drew reconsider. "Think about how great it is going to feel seeing me after all this time? Don't you want

that? Don't you want to hold me again and call me yours and think about all the amazing sex we can have, let's just think of the positives and wait this out okay?"

"Faye I don't know if that is what I want."

"Do you not want me?"

"I do."

"Then what is it?" Faye asked through her fresh tears.

"This is harder than I thought it would be, and well I am not sure we are worth it. Do we even make each other, I'm not happy anymore, haven't felt happy in a long time."

"How much is that based on you and I and how much is based on your family falling away at your fingertips? Don't take out your outside pain on us Drew, please, you love me. I know you do, you just have to remember that too. You love me right. Say it, say you love me...please just say it, Drew...say you love me."

"Faye...of course I love you, how couldn't I?"

Faye let out a whoosh of a breath, "Oh okay, we will end up fine as long as we remember we love each other. I love you too. So how about this we skype once a week this last six weeks and then I come home to you and see where we stand then? Just nothing drastic while I'm gone okay?"

"Yea okay I can do that, but I don't see why you can't come home when you said you were."

Faye in that moment realized how needy and afraid she had felt in the past few minutes, she wanted with every cell in her body to go home to Drew that night, if that meant he would still love her in the morning. Faye was afraid of losing him, of change, of not having someone love her the way Drew did. Faye thought back to all the days she spent meditating and figuring out why she was so dependent on Drew, and she knew it was because he allowed her to act that way, he allowed her to act in the worst version of herself. Faye felt the need to own him and much as she needed him to own her and with the strength she had spent the summer finding she said, "I can't come home I need to stay for me, I can't go on acting like this. I am also unhappy and maybe we both need to figure out what is causing that? I love you and want to stay with you, but I have to stay in Spain for myself."

Drew was not pleased with her answer, he was of course happy she was enjoying himself, but what about his pain, and what about him asking for her help. Drew made himself vulnerable for Faye and she was not taking the bait. Drew couldn't handle everyone disappearing from his life but he realized in the silence while staring at Faye's pixelated face, having at least this much of her was better than having nothing. So

Drew agreed to postpone the breakup conversation because he knew he couldn't handle leaving her any more than she could handle leaving him.

"Talk to you in a week then?" Drew broke the silence.

"I would love that. Send Louis my love and remind him of the health problems drinking can lead too, like his dad and grandfather. Scare him out of drinking Drew, show him you would do anything for him and that him drinking his life away is scaring you. Open up to him and he will do the same to you, I know it."

"I will try, thanks. Is this goodbye?"

"I don't have to get off yet, I mean sure I'm tired but we haven't talked in weeks, which we should talk about why that is. Were you avoiding me?"

"Another fight really? Haven't you had enough fighting? If this is what you want to talk about then I'm just going to end the call now, I woke up early but not to fight for hours and hours."

"I'm sorry you don't have to get all worked up, I was just trying to give you advice anyways."

"Maybe we should just call it a night Faye. You should go to bed."

Faye rubbed her eyes and hated herself for pushing Drew into another fight like she always did. They were doing okay for a minute and Faye could not let them have a single decent conversation since she left for Spain without it having two or more fights piled into the short Skype calls. "Yea okay, I love you? Skype time same next week?"

"Love you too babe, and sure." Drew clicked off and Faye muttered *don't call me babe* over the dead air space.

Chapter Thirty-One

Louis rolled himself off the bed in Drew's guest room, a bed that by now smelled of Louis, he felt good about it, gave him a more filling sense of home. Louis had spent much of the past eleven years hating the bed he came home to, feeling that it represented everything Danny refused to give to him, but now he felt almost content with the bed he was in. Louis did wish it smelled less of stale sweat and Pilsner beer, but at least the last two days Drew had drank with him. The first day was the day Faye originally was supposed to return home and Louis could tell Drew needed to simply not think about it. This also gave Louis the opportunity to drink without Drew looking at him with regret and disappointment.

Louis made his way into the kitchen seeing Drew half asleep over a cup of untouched black coffee. Drew looked worse for wear, he wasn't used to drinking this heavily. Drew hadn't spent multiple days in a row black out drunk since freshman year of college. The first day of drinking with Louis bled into the second, and now on the third Louis and Drew woke up still half drunk. Louis slide into the bar stool next to him and realized that Drew had done nothing but try and act in a way that Louis needed, Drew was trying his best to be his friend, and Louis knew that drinking away his problems was not Drew's solution and in reality it wouldn't help either of them. Louis poured out the stale coffee and started a fresh pot, while it was brewing he shooed Drew into the master bathroom and told him to shower. Louis then jumped in his own shower, washing off more than just a few days of drinking, Louis was scrubbing away Danny, and his self-loathing. He scrubbed until his body turned pink and the water ran cold, Louis left the shower feeling mentally more okay than he had in the weeks past. Louis planned on going out and buying breakfast for him and Drew, then calling up his director and letting him know that in a few weeks he would be ready to take his psyche evaluation. Louis was determined to sober up, even if it was just so he didn't drag Drew down with him, and Louis was okay for now using Drew as his excuse to get sober. He knew he needed one.

Just as Louis was pulling on a less rank shirt he heard his phone chime with Samson's ring tone. Louis was surprised that Samson was back already but he was glad for it. He reached over his unmade bed and slide the phone to his ear. Samson explained how Xavier now Jack was settled in and how he believed he was going to live a decently happy life. Louis realized that Samson had yet to debrief with their director, he did not know about Heather. Louis felt his throat retract when Samson asked how she handled everything. Louis didn't realize until that moment how much of the drinking and pawning it off as being because of Danny, had pushed back what had originally sent him into the downward spiral.

“Heather—Margret she uh, she didn’t make it.” Louis chocked out.

“What do you mean? Did they get her? Should I go back to Jack?” Samson rattled off question after question and Louis just closed his eyes and startled when Heather’s lifeless body appeared on his eyelids.

“Samson, she killed herself. Heather couldn’t handle Xavier leaving her behind, she blamed herself, and I wasn’t aware that she was that depressed. I missed it man and it cost her everything. I failed ya know?”

“Louis, no. . . I am so sorry, when did this happen? I am scheduled to go to the airbase in a week to fly out to the office, I wanted just a week of duty incase Xavier. . . Jack needed anything. First time I was with someone this long, seems weird to just leave.”

“Yea, really weird to never see them again.”

“Louis man, tell me do you need me to come to you?”

“Drew handled me okay, you said you’re in Montana a week? I have always wanted the. . . nature?”

Samson laughed, “Want to fly out here and you can tell me everything in person, I’ll buy you a lap dance.”

Louis felt himself smile, “I’ll catch a flight tonight, I’m sure Drew can hook me up with something, call you when I land?”

“Helena, and okay. One more thing, you still on the wagon?”

“I left the wagon behind weeks and weeks ago, but I’m working on it.”

“I got your back.”

Louis said goodbye and hung up, he went into his room and packed all his clean clothes, which wasn’t much. He then found his passport and his wallet and pulled up flights leaving that night, when he didn’t find much he called out for Drew. After he explained the situation and told Drew he felt like a bad influence he asked for help in a flight. Drew made a few calls and got Louis in at six with a Delta pilot he knew. Drew drove him to Midway and walked him all the way through to the loading gate, flashing his pilots’ license the whole way saying “It is the one cool thing this license gets me.”

At the gate Drew scratched the back of his neck and pulled Louis into a one armed hug, patting his back and pulling away in under six seconds. “Have a good flight and call if you need anything.”

“Thanks, you’ve. . . uh” Louis clears his throat and scuffs his right toe into the carpet. “Just thanks, for everything these past weeks, you really came through for me.”

“Wish I could have done more to be honest.”

Louis stood up straight and with a firm and unyielding voice told Drew, “You did more than I would have expect. You are true family and I want you to know it hasn’t gone to waste I’m going to get my life together I just need time.”

“Sure, sure. You’ll end up fine, we all do right?” Drew asked with a shaking voice.

“She’ll come home to you I know it, she loves you, and I know that want your love life to end with her, she is your end of life girl. I know it and I bet she does too. You just need patience.”

Drew pulled Louis in for another hug and they held it for a minute and both grown men coughed and turned to wipe their eyes in relative privacy. They said their final goodbyes with Louis promising to visit before he went active again.

Louis landed in Helena and met Samson at the exit and Samson gripped him in a bear hug and took his bags without saying a single word. Like promised they drove straight to a strip club and Samson laughed at all the guys in g-strings and told Louis to pick one and he would pay. Louis waited another twenty minutes before he spotted a man that made him feel for the first time in year’s true lust. He was wearing dark brown eyeliner giving him a more masculine look than black or a color would have done. He was walking around talking to people in navy blue Under Armor shorts. Louis felt his pulse pick up when he saw several tattoos lining his arms and back. Then when he got close enough Louis couldn’t look away from his perky mouth and the slight gap in his two front teeth.

“How much for a dance?” Samson asked him. Samson handed over a fifty and the guy winked at him and went to grab his hand to lead him into the back. “Not for me stud for my friend here, he just lost someone and he could use the cheering up.”

“Ah, you know I didn’t peg you as one and I am never wrong. Alright big guy what’s your name?” The man cocked his hip and his pecks flexed and Louis swallowed hard.

“Louis, yours?”

“Dave tonight.”

“Can I call you something that doesn’t start with a D?”

“Sure...how about, Justin?” Louis nodded and stood up and for the next fifteen minutes he forgot about Danny or Heather or the fact that he was a drunk like his father. For fifteen minutes he watched Justin twist his body for him and he felt better.

On the drive back to the hotel Samson as staying at he finally asked Louis how he was feeling and Louis smiled, "I'd take that man home with me and he would never leave."

"That is... I'm not even surprised. But seriously how are you, you look like crap, and how much have you drank since we spilt up?"

Louis explained how he couldn't cope with what he felt he had allowed to happen to Heather and how at first Drew tried and was succeeding in keeping him dry most of the day, but then he couldn't handle it and Louis admitted he was drinking to forget and then Danny came over and all things blew up from then on.

"I think I used what Danny said to me as an excuse to pretend I was drinking over a heartbreak but I wasn't."

Samson looked over at Louis then looked back to the freeway, "Then why were you?"

"I think I felt that if I was drinking because of Danny I would stop when I got over him and then my life would go back to normal. If I admitted I was drinking because of Heather I knew I had no end date on her. I don't plan on ever forgetting what I failed to prevent, which means I would drink myself to the grave, like my family, and I couldn't handle that. I am turning into a drunk and I am ready to admit that now."

Louis opened his mouth to say he understood why Louis would cling to Danny's disappointment to cope but instead he screamed and slammed on the breaks. Samson's right arm reached out to hold Louis back from the dash of the car. The tires squealed and Louis flew into the passenger window, he felt it shatter around him and as the airbag broke his nose he felt the world slip away.

Chapter Thirty-two

Danny rolled off his wife panting and he placed a kiss on her left cheek. Abigail smiled back at him with her eyes sliding closed. Danny rested her head on his chest and thought about how it was always hard to think about anyone but Louis after he slept with his wife. He tried to sleep with her as minimal as possible more for her benefit than his, he thought she would feel him thinking of Louis while sliding in and out of her, and he didn't want to take away her happiness he did love her enough to give up Louis in full after all.

Abigail woke up to Danny shouting loud enough to have her hear him from the back porch. She pushed her feet into slippers and wrapped her teal paisley robe around herself and rushed out to Danny. She slide open the door and leaned against the cool glass. She watched Danny pace on the deck while repeatedly asking why they would call him if they had no recent news to tell him. Abigail tried to get his attention several time but each time Danny shooed her away. Abigail finally had enough and went into the kitchen to start making breakfast for the kids.

By the time she finished the pancakes Danny was rushing back inside and locked himself into his office. Abigail had enough at the sound of the door slamming closed. She thought they had such a nice night and now Danny was acting his aloof self again and she was sick of it. She knew he was feeling stressed out because Peter hadn't talked to anyone lately and even Shania was giving her a cold shoulder. Abigail knew that Drew and Danny had a small falling out but it wasn't the first time they went a few months or a year without speaking, they always had misunderstanding, and Abigail knew they would bury the hatchet soon enough. Abigail pounded on Danny's office door until he wrenched it open with his eyes wide with unshed tears lining his lower lids.

"Danny...what's happening?" Abigail asked while putting a foot in between the wall and the door.

"I have to call Drew I can't make it out in time and someone should go. I can't go because..."

Danny shook his head realizing who he was talking to and a hard look up and down the length of Abigail he sighed and leaned his head against the door. Danny's shoulders slumped and he felt defeated, he couldn't go to Louis if he wanted to, and if Louis died he would not have the ability to get his goodbye or his forgiveness. "Louis got in a car accident, he was in Montana with his partner Samson and a drunk driver smashed into their car going like ninety or something he is in surgery and I guess he didn't look so good before they took him into surgery."

Abigail felt something strange stir in her stomach, it was the same feeling she used to get when Louis would show up unannounced and Danny would become more animated and happier than she had seen him in months. The stirring continued as Danny explained how he couldn't get time off of work to fly out to him right now, but Drew could. Abigail took her foot back and she started to feel hot and clammy.

"I thought you said Louis was a bad influence, I thought you cut him out of your life, and if you did why do you care?" Abigail knew she was acting unfair, they were best friends, but Danny looked destroyed and a friend who you haven't spoken to in close to a year does not make a person look that distraught.

"He could die Abby, fuck his family regardless of everything he is my family, and my best friend. He needs me to at least find someone to go see him."

"Or claim his body." Abigail felt her comment backhand Danny.

"Don't you dare." Danny closed the door in Abigail's face and she felt herself burn up. It was always the most extreme emotions for Louis. When he would leave Danny would act like a kicked puppy for days and sometimes weeks if Louis failed to check in. If Louis waited too long Danny would always call around until he reached someone who knew something even if it was just the same information he already had. Danny never acted so passionate about anything else, only ever just Louis.

Danny called Drew and was relieved when Drew didn't send him to voicemail. Still Danny didn't expect Drew to stay on the phone with him long, "Drew it is Louis, he was in a crash and I need you to fly up to Montana and make sure he is okay for me."

"What? He just left I think last night. What kind of crash? It wasn't a plane crash. . ."

"No car, a drunk driver hit him and Samson."

"How do you know" Drew asked.

"Emergency contact. Will you fly up and make sure he is okay? Today?"

Danny listened to Drew shuffle a few things around and then, "Why don't you?"

"Don't start with me Drew I can't I have a family and work and I just can't see him. . . like that."

Drew shot back, "Or at all."

"Just go please?"

"Of course I'd go I am family."

Drew called up friends for the second time in so many days and begged the one person—Kirstin who was flying out to Helena to let him ride jump seat. She laughed and asked him the last time he did that

and he told her it was the in the same month that he got offered a job flying cargo over ten years ago. Drew backed his flight bag and his old hiking backpack for a few days and locked up behind him. He had two hours to get to Chicago before Kirstin's flight took off.

Drew landed six hours and one fuel up later in Montana. Drew pulled out his phone and pulled up his Uber app and in thirty minutest he was on his way to Louis. The driver Trevor asked him what he was doing in Helena.

"Family member got in an accident had to fly out and see him."

"Rough man, this one time I was hiking in Oregon and I broke my foot but I didn't know till I came back and my mom was freaking out. Saying how I could have lost the foot. Really though it was just a little fracture. I had to wear this brace thing, crazy hard to walk in it. But my nurse was mega fine, isn't that the best. Do you think your friend has a hot one? Nurse I mean?"

Drew tried not to yell at this kid in a marron beanie and baseball tee with the word OBEY written across it. Faye's voice came into his mind telling him not to judge and to thank him for filling the silence with something interesting. Drew just nodded and asked him how long it would take.

"I dunno man, with how light traffic is maybe just another ten minutes, but sometimes it can take fifteen. Your friend waiting for you to pick him up or something?"

"He is in surgery so no."

Trevor sputtered and realized that anything he said would meet a brick wall. Instead he turned on the jazz CD he had hoping it would soothe some of the nerves. Drew practically threw the money at Trevor shouting for him to keep the change and he sprinted to the front of the hospital. He slowed his footsteps before he entered and calmed his breathing, he did not in fact want to make a scene, and people are more helpful to those who do not demand attention. Drew walked up to the first reception area he found and after relaying his information he was pointed to the west wing where post-op patients were kept and told room 223D was where Louis was.

Drew turned the last corner and saw that Louis room was open and he stopped in the doorway. Drew watched as the nurse took his vitals and wrote a few things down on Louis's chart. She smiled and nodded at Drew as she passed by his left shoulder. Drew walked over to the chair that Samson was sleeping in and shook his shoulder that was also clad in a hospital gown. Samson started awake and when he locked eyes with Drew let out a relieved sigh.

“Glad you made it, I wasn’t sure who was on his emergency contact other than me, and well I was already here.”

“It was Danny he told me. How is he?” Drew tried not to look closely at the damage done to Louis in fear of thinking the worse.

“He woke up a few hours ago but nothing since then. Doctors think he just needs rest, some of his organs aren’t doing so well though. Mostly his liver. Shocker I know.”

Drew started at the news, “From his drinking?”

“Well the anemia for sure is from the drinking.”

“I didn’t realize he was anemic.” Drew said in confusion.

“Apparently it is a side effect of drinking chronically.”

“I mean he just started drinking this heavily. I don’t believe such a short time could cause any real problems.”

“Drew...he has gone to AA meetings for the last eight years. Every time he returns home he drinks and then comes back to work with a problem. If we aren’t on an active case he is drinking all the time. He never told you?”

Drew pawed at his face and shook his head in the negative. Drew had no idea how bad Louis had got, in fact in the past ten years Drew only saw Louis maybe every other time he came home. How was he supposed to notice something like alcoholism in such brief periods, but Drew then realized that Danny should have noticed, would have noticed. If Drew was pissed at Danny before he was out right livid now. Louis could die because Danny drove him to drink. Louis could die because Danny did not help him, did not let the rest of the family know how bad things had got.

“I didn’t realize how hard he was struggling.” Drew looked over Louis and saw how damaged his body looked. He had a right leg cast and a right wrist cast. His face was cut up and bruised but he seemed alive and okay.

“He will end up okay, Louis always does. The accident did the damage you see but a piece of metal from the car door punctured his abdomen and for a while he had massive internal bleeding, and I believe they had to stitch up part of his kidney or liver or something. But doctors think he will make a full recovery.”

Drew nodded his head, “What about you?”

Samson rattled his IV stand. “Well few cuts and everything. Sprained a few things and had to get surgery to stop some bleeding but I got the clear to go back to work in a two weeks. I’m just worried about him.”

Drew was worried too, he would not put it past Louis to take this as his easy way to die, his exit on stage left. A poetic end to his life that was full of suffering and hardship. Samson eventually was carted back to his own room and Drew took his place in the seat on Louis right. Drew wondered if he should hold Louis’s hand or if he really was just sleeping. After falling asleep for an hour Drew woke up from a hand fluffing up the back of his hair. Drew stretched and gave a lazy smile to Louis who was smiling through his bruises back at him.

“Feeling okay man?” Drew asked with an airy tone.

“Define okay? I feel alive and I can start with that.” Louis laughed and then winced. “Honestly, I feel a little off. Like I know something is wrong with my insides but I am not sure what.”

“Maybe that is what healing feels like.” Louis just shrugged while looking down at his midsection with concern.

Drew spent a few hours asking him what he remembered from the accident and afterwards and after Louis told him he couldn’t even remember getting into the car with Samson, but he remembered waking up once before now, Drew felt himself melt into his chair. The first time since receiving the new Drew had faith that Louis was okay. Drew stayed the next day to make sure Louis pulled through the night. When he came in to spend a few hours before his flight with Louis, Drew walked in to him guzzling down three cherry jello-s in a row.

“After watching that I am more confident leaving you.”

“What sick people can’t hammer back three cups of jell-o?”

“Something like that, how ya feeling?” Drew asked while reading over what he could make out in Louis’s chart.

“Better than yesterday in the cognitive department, but they won’t give me pain meds because... well something to do with my insides, so pain wise I would say I’m worse.”

Drew put the chart down at that, “Want me to stay for a few days?” Louis shooed the idea away with his wrist and demanded before Drew left that he get him more jell-o cups, and when Drew said goodbye to Louis he felt his stomach tighten up and the idea that maybe Louis was not in the clear yet. But leave he did.

Chapter Thirty-three

Drew flew back home the normal way and enjoyed just acting like a regular person. He thought about how in just three weeks Faye would fly back home and hopefully they could work things out. Drew realized with the scare that Louis had brought how fragile all life was and Faye's was. Drew wanted to imprint himself a little longer at least on Faye's fragile life. He wasn't sure if they would make it the long haul yet, but he wanted if they did fail and break apart for him to spread the ashes of their relationship to her future ones. He wanted her to understand what a good guy was like and therefore look for him in all other guy she dated. He didn't mean it in a way to make him immortal rather, that Faye would always know that she deserved respect and unyielding love. Drew, as he watched trees bleed into brushstrokes of green, loved Faye because she was the painter to the landscapes he saw while flying. She was the yielder of his brushstrokes, together they created a unique flight of colors and imagery, which all come together to make in Drew's mind the masterpiece his life needed.

When the plane landed in Chicago and Drew got into his car his phone blew up with missed calls. Drew felt his stomach drop when he realized that it was the hospital. He didn't bother to listen to the voicemails instead he called straight back. After he was transferred a few times a Doctor Hemholt came on and asked if he was Louis' emergency contact, and as of that day he was. Hemholt informed Drew that Louis's internal bleeding came back and they had to take him into surgery again. When a pause happened Drew feared the worse.

"Is Louis still okay? Did the surgery work?"

Hemholt's stuttered for a second then said, "Yes the original surgery worked to stop the bleeding, but sometimes complications happen and unfortunately for Louis his liver is very damaged early-middle stages of cirrhosis, according to his friend who came in with him, Samson, Louis is a heavy drinking and has been on and off since he was around sixteen is that correct?"

Drew's mind reeled, sixteen, they were all happy at sixteen. Then Drew remembered all the deaths those few years and it made sense that watching his family die one after one was the beginning of the problem for Louis. "Yea I would say that sounds accurate."

The doctor went on to explain how the best option for Louis at this point would stop all drinking for the rest of his life in order to not make the condition worse. "No cure to reverse cirrhosis exist as of yet, all we can hope is that it doesn't get worse. However, with all the trauma to his body at the moment a few organs

seem as if they are pushing harder than normal and we here are concerned that Louis' liver is going to shut down if nothing drastic is done."

"What would you suggest?"

"I would like to put Louis on the transplant list. I will warn you though that livers tend not to always go to patients who ruined theirs because of drinking."

Drew raised his voice, "But the accident made it worse, it could have lived a full and happy life, so shouldn't the transplant board look at that?"

"Either way with your permission seeing how Louis has not woken up yet I would like to put him on that transplant list."

Drew agreed and then hung up. His next call was to work telling them of the family situation and cashing in two weeks of vacation time saved up to avoid flying out the next time. Drew drives straight back home and when he pulls up the drive way he is shocked that his auto pilot took him to Monica. Drew sits in his car for a few minutes thinking about what he is supposed to do. He wants to scream and punch Louis in his face for doing this to himself and doing this to the last part of the family Drew was able to hold together. Maybe that is why his mind took him to Monica, because she was safe, and she was comfort. Mainly it was because she was his to grasp if he needed it.

Drew unlocked the front door and found her watching late night t.v. in her bed. She gasped at the sight of him and dashed off the bed and traced her palms all over his body asking over and over again what was wrong, what had happened? Monica could see the distressed etched into the frown on Drew's face, the way his back was hunched over. She read the sadness and confusion the way his hands clenched into fists and then released just to go back to fist again. Drew's whole body was sprung up and ready to either devour someone or fall into pieces.

"Louis got into an accident and he needs a liver transplant. The fucking idiot drank his life away...he did this to himself and now I can't fix it. I have no one left, it was just Louis. Peter is gone." Drew started to take shallow breathes, "Danny is a dick, or he always has been but I didn't notice." Drew felt himself turning into legos, and each word was a brick that was falling to the floor. "Faye is in Europe and I'm not sure she is mine anymore, or if she is coming back...you left me...Mon you left me and..." Heavy hot tears fell down Drew's cheeks and across Monica's fingers. "Everything is falling apart. My family is gone...again."

Monica made a noise in the back of her throat similar to a newborn fawns cry when his mother leaves for the first time, all wanting but full of confusion. Monica was shocked Drew was even referencing his parents at all. They had died when he was twelve and he grew up with his aunt and uncle. Drew didn't have bad memories of his family just lacking in a lot of them. He hung out with his friends growing up any chance he got and never bonded over baseball with his dad, or doing dishes with his mom. Instead he viewed them as roommates who cooked and cleaned for him. Drew rode his bike everywhere so rides weren't a problem and Marshall was such a small town that a few miles on a bike felt like nothing. When his parents died of Carbon Monoxide poisoning Drew felt like he missed out on getting to know them and because of that he refused to bond with his new guardians. Monica knew that was the real reason he didn't want to have children, he was afraid that they would view him as replaceable as he viewed his parents.

"Shh...shh...sweetie none of that, Louis I am sure will pull through and most people don't have a family like yours, but it is a family and families always have fallouts, you guys will figure it out and I am sure end up stronger than before. Come lay down sweetie and tell me what happened with Louis. I'll even rub your back like old times. Just relax and know I am here for you, you Drew are never alone."

Chapter Thirty-four

In the morning Drew crept out of the house without waking Monica. He drove to his apartment and fished out the tabs of acid that Faye left before they could take together. Drew loved Faye but he knew that Monica was a promise and right now he needed to fulfill that promise. Drew had promised when he married her that he would cherish and bring her happiness. Drew knew he had failed at doing that so they got a divorce when their demons stopped playing well together, but now Drew knew Monica was able to see how much he just wanted to cherish her. Drew stared at the tabs in his palm and realized with clarity that they gave him a chance to see Monica in the way that he did when he fell in love with her and he needed that comfort. Drew knew he would have to convince Monica to trip with him but he wasn't worried, she hadn't touched drugs since college but Drew knew Monica and he knew that she would jump at the chance to relive the past too.

Drew drove back to Monica and when he entered the kitchen to see her making herself an omelet she sent a glare his way. "I'm surprised you came back."

"I just ran home to get us something." He held out his palm and in the baggy Monica could see the tabs. She looked back at Drew with apprehensive written clear across her face.

"You brought me drugs? What is wrong with you?" She turned away from Drew and flipped the eggs onto a plate and turned off the stove, but she made no motion to grab a fork or start eating.

"No, Mon wait. I want us to feel like we did in college remember? They day we did this and walked around and how amazing you were how unreal you were?"

Monica turned back to Drew with an eyebrow raised, "Unreal?"

"Untouchable, like a rare gem that you can look at behind a glass case, but you cannot touch without white gloves, because my hands are not pure enough. I watched you from outside your glass prism, and I loved you that day. So, yes I brought us drugs, I am having moment in my life where everything is falling apart and I want to remember us how we were. I want to experience this again with you. I guess this is my last ditch effort to do something that matters, I came here to you Mon, not because I wanted to seduce you, or to have you take me out of doing this. I wanted to relearn my love for you even if it is only in our eyes, and even if it is only this one last day."

Monica reached out for Drew's hand and fished out a tab and placed it on her tongue. They spent hours in bed, outside, inside each other, and Drew felt alive. Drew left two days later in the morning bone

cold sober and realizing that Faye would never forgive his infidelity. Monica had smiled as Drew told her he had to go. Monica was not surprised that Drew was leaving her, she never expected him to stay not yet. Monica was waiting for Faye to come home for him to tell her and then Drew would come back to her. For now Monica told him that Faye would understand if he told her. Drew thought about Faye's tattoo '*haunted hearts are beautifully lonely hunters*'. Faye had hunted Drew and Drew realized that all he was going to leave Faye with was a few experiences at eight thousand feet and more haunted heart.

Drew sat in his living room thinking over the exact words that he would say to Faye and somehow the blunt, *I cheated on you with my ex-wife* just didn't encompass the full damage he knew he did. Drew pictured Faye painting a landscape in Spain while sipping a Pinot Noir and thinking about how peaceful her life was turning out as. Then Drew thought maybe he could cross her mind and she would smile and think how ready she was to come home to him. He had taken that from her, she was going to come back to an Earth shattering realization that he was just like every other shit head she had let love her.

It only took Drew two more days before he realized what little he could do in order to make up for cheating on Faye, and to him that was calling Louis up at the hospital and discussing the potential of Drew getting himself tested to see if he could donate part of his liver to Louis. Drew had spent the past few hours researching how he could help Louis and the best bet was cutting off a chunk of his own liver and if Louis was compatible giving him his healthy liver and Drew's own liver would grow back mostly and in turn the piece in Louis would itself grow. Louis of course called Drew a few choice names but once he realized Drew was serious his voice cracked.

"Don't think I need you to do this for me. Surgeries of any kind come with complications and I won't have you dying for me." Louis said.

"Shut up, I'm not going to die. If you want I can go out this week and get tested, I'll call up my doctor. Faye comes home in a week, I think, she is supposed to Skype me any day with the actual details, would you survive if I end up as a match waiting to cut me open until after she comes home?"

Louis laughed and said of course. Louis wanted to thank Drew a thousand times for even attempting to help him, but he knew Drew and instead just laughed and said he was acting very heroic. "Trying to impress Faye before she returns?"

"Yea something like that." In reality Drew realized that Faye was a lost cause and that his last real tie to family was dying across the country and Drew could do anything to keep that family alive he knew he had

to take it. Drew wanted to tell Louis about sleeping with Monica but as he went to confide in him the words turned to code and only sounds came out.

“Drew? What was that?”

“Just hang on for a little while longer okay? I don’t want to get tested for nothing.”

“It’s a blood test you act like they are going to pull your marrow or something.”

“My blood is worth just as much.” Drew joked. “I’ll have the results sent to your doctor and I’ll call you in a few days okay? Oh and how is Samson holding up?”

“He’s fine, next to me actually. He got tested already he wasn’t a match, plus I doubt his liver is in much better shape. Oh you dick don’t hit the sick.” Louis laughed as he said goodbye and Drew tried not to feel horrible about the fact that Samson clearly thought about Louis before he did.

Drew sat on his couch and thought about what it meant that Samson thought about acting as a living donor days before he did. Drew realized after crossing off the basic, he is at the hospital already, Louis could have asked him, and maybe he had done this before? Drew knew the truth, he was selfless and he was Louis’s family. Louis had a family outside of the one he shared with Drew, he had to he was gone so often and always in dangerous situation. It did not surprise Drew to realize this just shocked him how long it took for him to acknowledge that Louis was not suffering the same loss of self that Drew was with the lack of family. Instead, Drew felt happy for Louis, he felt himself smile thinking about Samson taking care of Louis. Now all Louis needed was a new love interest.

Drew himself was not selfish but he was not as easily a giving person, he tended to have a hard time seeing outside of his own trauma and problems. Drew got tested and told he would have the results in under a week, and when his computer pinged with the long forgotten Skype sound he forgot about the importance of telling Louis to expect the results soon too. Drew sprinted to his computer and answered Faye’s call. She sat in front of the black mirror and her hair was lighter and longer. Her eyes were sparkling and Drew saw freckles he had never noticed scattered on her cheeks. Faye looked in that eternal moment as a wild daffodil before the early frost settles on its petals.

“I’ve missed just looking at you.” Faye breathed out. To her Drew looked a tad haggard his stubble was turning into a beard that he had never had with her. She noticed a few stains on his sleep shirt and wondered when he did laundry last. But she was focused on the cheek stretching smile that he graced her with. Drew looked like the ease she forgot their relationship was founded on.

“You stole my line, Spain has treated you well I see.”

“No stress just happiness treated me well.” Faye countered. Drew ruffled his hair and asked,

“So when do I get to count your freckles in person.” Faye let out a light giggle and Drew felt warmth glow in his chest. It was the same giggle he gave her the first real sober night they spent together. He had asked if she would like to get as close as possible to touching the stars and she was so befuddled that she said ‘okay’ and when he first drove up to his Cessna she had giggled, finally understanding. She had giggled for him then and his skills at flying at the new wonderment he was showing into her life. Now she giggled for him again and Drew relished in it.

“I told you I’d fly home in two weeks from now.” Drew nodded realizing he couldn’t keep Louis waiting that long. “But I think I really miss you.” Faye smiled shyly. For Faye it felt almost like they were starting over and that is all she wanted a clean slate. “So I booked a plane ticket for the day after tomorrow. Care to pick me up if I send you my flight itinerary?”

Drew shouted, “Of course!” Faye full out laughed at his response and they spent the next twenty minutes just glowing at each other.

“I love you Faye, even with everything that has happened I love you.”

“Still. You still love me.” Faye corrected.

“I will always still love you.” Drew spoke with passion.

“I will always still love you too.” Faye kissed the camera and said goodbye.

Drew forced himself to stop smiling when his cheeks began to ache. It wasn’t hard when Drew thought about how Faye’s happiness and hope would not last the week. As he closed his laptop and decided to pay Monica yet another visit, Drew walked himself through how his reunion with Faye would go. He would drive to the airport with flowers and swing her around at the first moment she was within touching distance. He would hear her chiming giggle and bask in it. Drew would drive them back to her apartment, an apartment that he would call Stella to make sure was clean and fresh for Faye. Then he would walk Faye into her bedroom and lead her to the bed. She would smirk at Drew thinking they were going to reclaim their relationship. Instead Drew would drop to his knees and while staring into Faye’s crystal eyes he would watch ever brick, every ounce of mortar, and every nail that he had torn down build itself back up. He would watch as Faye rebuilt her barrier to keep him out. Faye would cringe away when his hand tried to reach for the tears tracing down her cheeks and Drew would have finally taught her why storms are named after people.

Chapter Thirty-five

Drew slammed open Monica's front door and screamed for her pain lacing each syllable. Monica rushed out of her laundry room and up to Drew asking over and over again what was wrong. Drew sunk into the black leather chaise lounges in her living room and held onto Monica's hands as he told her how Faye would never mention him to anyone in the future.

"I'll act as this black year in her life, something she doesn't mention, and I would deserved it. She will say she dated an older guy once and once was all it took for her to learn her lesson. Maybe she will say she dated a pilot too, maybe just talk about the flying experience but never about me. I ruined that... I ruined us and I don't even know if I regret it." Drew looked at Monica, her hair was pulled high into a pony tail and she was without makeup. He saw her crow's feet and how she had more wrinkles than he left her with. Yet, Drew also saw her with pigtails and a French braid, a girl with too much lipstick on prom night, and a veil covering her blushed face.

"I could never regret a single moment of happiness with you."

"But you regret the unhappy moments?" Monica whispered.

"I regret causing yours." Drew leaned into Monica's shoulder and they silently sat together. Monica wondering if Drew would, with the loss of Faye, finally know in his heart that they belonged together.

"Family causes pain but we always forgive it. I've always forgiven you." Monica kissed the top of his head.

"Do you think Faye will forgive me?"

"Eventually if she's smart. Holding grudges takes more pain than it is worth."

"When did you forgive me for leaving?" Drew asked while pulling away from her.

Monica sat back against the cushions and closed her eyes. "When you came back."

Drew spent the rest of the evening with Monica trying to forget his guilt and also relishing in the attention she was giving him. Of course he felt the guilt tracing itself up his shins and towards his heart. If he let it the guilt would taint his whole body. Instead of giving in he told Monica about his plans with Louis and how he was nervous, not for the operation but that he would not end up as a match.

"Louis doesn't get a free pass to die, I don't know why but I can tell you his story isn't over." Monica spoke over the animal documentary they had playing in the background.

"I lost Faye and I can't imagine losing Louis too." Drew said around his sip of Two-Hearted beer.

Monica wondered if she should prepare for a distraught and self-destroying Drew if Louis wasn't a match. Again the same feeling in the pit of her stomach told her it wasn't going to end up that way. Monica didn't believe in many things of what she did her and Drew being soul mates was number one. She also believed that life would not lead you down a path that would kill others. Louis's failing liver was killing Drew and if Drew was not a match it could actually kill him. Monica choose to believe that whatever forces ruled the universe it was one that only took one life at a time.

"You haven't lost Faye yet."

"I'm going to though, as soon as I tell her I slept with you she is going to leave me. She should leave me... I wouldn't respect her for staying with me, I don't deserve it."

"Then don't tell her."

Drew faced Monica while placing his beer on the coffee table. Drew wasn't blind or dumb he knew that Monica was trying to worm her way back into his life and he was allowing her to, for now. He enjoyed the comfort that came with Monica, the routine of it. However, Drew was surprised to hear her advocate him to lie.

"As in don't tell her now or don't tell Faye ever?" Monica just shrugged. "I can't lie to her Mon. I've done enough she... Faye has had one of the hardest lives I've ever personally known about. She told me about how when she was a kid this neighbor of hers touched her and when her mom found out she blamed Faye, told her if she had more God in her life it would never have happened. How fucked is that. Faye tells me this story and what do I do to repay her trust? I sleep with my ex-wife. After all the trust Faye has given me I am honor bound to tell her and I could never hold her fragile shoulders in my hands after this anyways. I want her to grow from the pain I'll cause her and I want her to find a happiness that is greater than the melancholy love I've shown her."

The moon settled behind a few clouds and the living room was dusted with a darkness that Monica found haunting. She saw how hollow Drew's cheeks were, how ragged his clothes had become over the past few months. Drew had brought her acid and made himself a cheater for the first time in his thirty-seven years. The electrons fired in Monica's brain and she grappled with her conscience. She wanted to monopolize on the opportunity of a fragile and heartbroken Drew. She could lend a listening ear and a loving embrace, she could seduce him back into her arms. Monica was old enough to know how wrong that was and how it wouldn't last and at the end of it she would have less of Drew than ever before. But he was looking at her like

he did when his mother died, confused and eager to have the power of decision taken away. Monica steeled herself for the repercussions that she knew in a few months or weeks would come.

“Don’t tell her,” Monica’s voice was strong but barely more than a wisp of a sound. “You deserve happiness and what we did doesn’t have to end that for you. I’m here for you know matter what you do, but I just want you to end up happy, and if that is with Faye then I’ll take just having you as my family not as my husband.”

Chapter Thirty-six

Faye trudged into her apartment alone and dejected. After calling Drew's cell four times and leaving as many messages she caught a taxi to the train station and then from there rode the train to Kalamazoo where she got another taxi to take her home. Her bank account scowled at Faye and the jet lag was pulling her eyelids closed. When Faye shouldered her bedroom door open she was surprised to see Drew sitting in the middle of her bed with dead eyes staring at her.

"Glad you made it home okay. Sorry I couldn't pick you up." Drew's voice was cold and flat. Faye flinched at the sound of it and dropped her luggage to the ground and strode over to him.

"Why?" Drew couldn't respond his heart was pounding loud enough for the neighbors to hear its nervous beat. He was full of the bad type of adrenaline. Faye was tracing her thumb across her necklace, the necklace she had worn non stop for close to a year. She had bought it because of Drew. She had asked him one night while laying across his chest, "What is one thing you wish was different, about me I mean?" Drew always hated that question. It had no decent answer it was a trap. Drew knew Faye wanted him to say something cute like *I wish you would smile more, or I wish you weren't my girlfriend but my wife.*

Instead Drew told the truth, he hated her negativity, he understood it but he hated it all the same. Faye came over the next night wearing a new necklace. When she pointed it out to him she explained that it was Scandinavian rune stone necklace and, "It wards off negative emotions, which apparently I have too many of." Faye had never gone a day without wearing it since. Now as she felt negative thoughts creep into her mind she traced it asking her Nordic ancestors to lend her strength.

Drew watched Faye paw at her necklace and he knew that he was experiencing his last moments with her. He felt as if he was watching from the outside, he could see himself sitting on her bed and not saying a word. He saw Faye shift foot to foot and he noticed how exhausted she looked. The truth was Drew knew if he picked her up in Chicago by the time he made it back to her place he would have decided he would rather lie to her and keep her than tell her the truth. She had that power of him, she would have showed him her freckles and giggled. She would have told him all about the flight and tried to impress him with her technical terms and he would have fallen in love with her all over again. Drew was selfish, he knew that now, and he would have kept her all to himself.

Drew sucked in a breath and launched his story about how he felt his family slipping through his fingers. How Louis was dying in Montana and Drew was scared he would have no one left in his Hodge

podge family. Drew spoke in hush tones as he spelled out stealing the acid Faye had bought for them to take together and how he instead took it with Monica. Drew shuddered as he nailed himself in his own coffin and told Faye how he slept with Monica several times.

“I will never forget that I did this to us Faye. I will never redeem myself in your eyes, I know that, but I’m telling you this because you deserve the truth. I’m sorry but I still love you I do.” Drew wasn’t going to say it but Faye’s eyes were already closing off to him and it stabbed him in a way that knocked all the air out of his lungs.

“I will always still love you. . . I need you to know that. Faye say something.” Drew felt his voice shaking, “Please.”

Drew would always remember how Faye poised her hand and was seconds away from striking him, but instead she grabbed onto her necklace. Drew knew she couldn’t strike him even if it was called for, it was not in her beliefs. She traced the stone in silence and Drew could hear her voice whispering to him from the past, “Nothing good comes from a shared silence.”

When Faye let go of the necklace, her eyes glazed over for a second too long and even then in those extra moments Drew could not think of anything to tell her. He knew why he slept with Monica, he knew before he told Faye what he was going to say if she asked. But she wasn’t asking and Drew didn’t think it would help.

They shared a silence, long and cold. Faye was right Drew thought, nothing good would come of it. Faye in the end opened up her backpack and pulled out a small bag of trinkets and handed them over to Drew without saying a word. Drew stood up to accept them and he choked on the thank you. Drew watched as Faye reached out and traced the back of her hand down his right temple then cheek. She took her other hand and traced the bridge of his nose then both of his lips. Faye leaned in and placed a chaise kiss on his lips and then whispered against them, “Leave and forget me.” Faye pushed open her bedroom door and without saying a word watched as Drew left her life.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Drew felt grateful that his doctor called him three days after Faye had told him to forget about her, a demand he was not succeeding at. Drew felt his luck changing and his spirits lifting when he received word that he was a go to head to Montana and start the prep for the procedure. While Drew knew the surgery could still take a few weeks to set up he had a kind of full body hope he had lost months before he lost Faye.

Drew was packing when he thought about Danny, he had come across a pair of socks that had cows getting abducted by flying saucers on them. Danny had bought them for Drew over three years ago and Drew used to wear them every family gathering because they drove Abigail and Shania crazy, they thought they were such a fashion do-not. Drew held the socks up to the light and noticed how thread bare they had become. He thought about packing them, he was sure Louis would get a laugh out of it. The socks are what lead Drew to call Danny, at least that is what he would claim if anyone asked him.

Danny answered and after Drew told him about finding the socks and them both having a laugh, awkward and stiff, but still a laugh, Danny asked what Drew needed. "I'm flying out tonight to Montana, well to Louis. He needs you know a new liver and as luck or divine intervention would have it I am a match. So a piece of my liver is going to replace the one Louis drank away."

Danny hesitated while gripping the phone tighter. Danny sent a silent thank you up to anyone who would listen. "I am pleased that Louis will live and it seems poetic that he would end up with one of our livers, yea?"

"Danny, have you spoken to him? Because you should. Even though I am a match accidents happen all the time in surgery and one if not both of us might not make it out."

"I have nothing left to say to Louis other than I hope he pulls through for your sake."

"Don't do this Danny, this could end up as your *last* chance." Drew pleaded.

"Louis and I have both made it clear that our friendship is over. I wish ours could survive this Drew but you seem to have picked sides." Danny's voice was seeping with malice and jealous.

"I wanted us all. You, Peter, Louis, and Monica."

"Not Faye? I thought you had planned on her joining us?"

"We broke up, and that isn't the point." Drew grunted out. "We have always had each other. I think I ruined things with Peter or we all did. I do not know if Monica cares to call any of us family anymore, again maybe that was my fault too. But Danny if you leave the family it is on you not me. You will choose it not

me. I did not push you away, I have always tried to keep you and pull you back in. I am not doing it anymore. You want to stay a family prove it!"

"How?"

"For starters call Louis you owe it to him. Bury the hatchet and try to tell him you are sorry. Try for any sort of remorse. If he dies I want him to at least die with family." Drew pushed the picture of Samson from his mind.

"I don't know if I want to do that," Danny braced himself, "I won't belittle myself for him not anymore."

"I can't believe you Danny you aren't the man I thought you were."

"And you aren't the brother I needed you to be."

Danny heard the line go dead and he wondered if he was to see Drew in a few months walking down the road if he would turn away or into a store to avoid talking. Danny hoped that maybe after everything had time to settle the dust they could go back to how they were before he knew about Louis and himself. Danny wasn't going to call Louis at least that is what he told himself for two hours and twenty seven minutes. At minute twenty eight he bolted off the couch startling Jill who was reading next to him. He rushed to his office and locked the door behind him. He googled the hospitals number and asked for Louis after he was connected his brain caught up to him and he pulled the phone away from his face. His thumb hovered the *end* button and right before he pressed it he heard a distance 'hello?' and his decision was made for him. How long had he gone without hearing Louis' voice?

"I hear that you might live after all?" Danny rushed out.

Louis scrunched his white cotton blanket in his left fist and squeezed his eyes shut with the onslaught of emotions such a simple sentence brought him.

"Drew came through for me, so maybe?"

"I am very glad to hear that." Danny's voice cracked betraying him. "I never stopped worrying, I want you to know that."

"Why?"

"Because you matter to me, I've known you my whole life of course I was worried, I'm not heartless."

Louis interrupted, "No, why did you want me to know?"

Danny stuttered, why did he want Louis to know? He wasn't sure but at the fluttering his stomach was doing by just his voice alone Danny figured it had a lot to do with not moving on from him. "I want you to know I care just in case—"

"In case what? I die? You want me to go to my grave knowing that I ruined us not you, because you still *care about me*? You are such a selfish bastard Danny." Louis felt the last piece of kindness he had for Danny sizzle off of his heart and as the ash landed in his veins his body was attacking it, like the cancer it was.

"I am not trying to turn this into a fight. Drew called and told me he is a match and I wanted to tell you that I am glad, that is all. Just glad you are going to live. That you aren't going to leave us, the family." Danny held his breath waiting for Louis to calm down and hoping that they could talk like they used to. Drew wanted to mend things and even if Danny wasn't sure he did he missed Louis, completely.

"I just don't need you to call me anymore Danny. I told you what I needed from you and you won't give it to me and I think I've finally accepted that. I am not going to die loving you that I am sure of."

Danny made a split second decision, "What if I could give you what you need?"

Louis did his best to sit up on his bed but winced when the motion made a bolt of pain jab into his side. "What are you saying Danny because the last time we talked you refused?"

"I know but what if we went back to how we were before?"

"I already told you no. I need more than that."

Danny dropped his head on his desk, "I could give you weekend trips away with me, romantic bed and breakfasts, and we could tell Drew."

Louis wanted to vomit. "I'm not a whore you can throw weekend trips at. You are not my Richard Gere."

"I am giving you all I have! Why is it not enough for you?"

Louis felt his throat close up at the raw emotion coming out of Danny's mouth. "I know you are giving me all you have but it just isn't enough. You love isn't enough and I am sorry but the answer will always stay as no. I want more than your love Danny I want shouted from the rooftops love. I want mouth kisses at restaurants and I want a husband!"

Danny let out a bitter laugh, "You are gay Louis good luck finding acceptance in that."

“I have Samson’s and Drew’s and one day I will have *his* whoever he is. I don’t care what my work will say or what the public throws at me I deserve a passionate in your face love that others take for granted and I won’t stop looking until I get it.”

“That is just it Louis, you aren’t going to find it! Who is going to accept that kind of love when you could die on the job? When you are gone for weeks and weeks. Who is going to understand that like I always have? What we had was perfect for both of us and you know it. Why don’t you just embrace it like you used to. Why are you determined to throw away eleven years?”

Louis sealed himself, “Danny I don’t want you to call me anymore. I want you to live your happy *straight* life and forget about me. I am going to do my best to forget about you. I deserve love and nothing hurts the human mind and spirit as much as a substantial change. But I am going to change and find him, the man who will love me the way I have loved you.”

As Louis placed the phone back on the receiver he smiled and felt lighter than he had in years. He knew his heart had holes in it but they didn’t feel like gashes rather windows that one day he hoped someone would make into a stained glass masterpiece.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Sometimes Faye would get sad and it was the type of sadness that would not escape out of the end of her paintbrush, rather it would make her fingers tremble at the thought of touching any palette. It was also the kind of sadness that had her smiling to hide from it. Faye had a family though and her family saw the dry bristles and the blank canvases as a clue. As the days turned to weeks they took care of Faye.

Faye walked up to her canvases that she had painted in Spain and shifted through them. She had painted blazing landscapes, grazing bulls, twirling boys, and not a single raven she had left her at home. Then Faye walked over in her sweats to her blank ones and as she shifted through the different sizes she paused at a four by four one. It was painted all over yellow with white lettering that read *'The best thing to happen to you is you.'* Faye crumpled onto the ground clutching the painting to her chest. She recognized Stella's and Lucy's handwriting and finally Faye let it out. She bawled for the loss of a year, the loss of a future she craved, the man she thought was her forever, and she wept for herself.

Stella came home to Faye in the same position an hour later, with tear caked cheeks, and hollow eyes. "Boo thang are you okay?" Faye turned the painting around and Stella gasped. "Took you long enough to find it."

Faye scooted over to Stella's legs and folding them in her arms, "Thank you just thank you." Stella felt her eyes fog up and she leaned down and embraced Faye. She patted back Faye's hair while whispering words of love. "I think I'll be okay now."

And she was. It took a few more days but when Faye finally picked up her brush she dipped it in black paint three days later she stepped away from her piece. Faye was well feed and rested she did not feel the need to fully escape into her color cube rather she would enter it for brief moments of inspiration but for the first time in her life she didn't need to loose herself in it to feel safe. Faye did not claim to feel healed from Drew but she was moving past it and growing.

She called Stella and Lucy from the living room and they both smiled when they saw what Faye had managed to complete. "Your raven." Lucy stated

"It looks—" Stella started

"—complete and happy." Lucy finished.

Faye smiled at them and at her raven. It was taking the second flap after leaping off a branch, not quite soaring but the second before the wind would catch her wings. It was the beginning of the journey, the exhilaration of what lies just after the first push without a second of hesitation.

“She is taking off and flying not to flee not to find something but just to feel what she was born to do, evolved to do, and that is what she plans to do now, just fly.”

“I can’t imagine her doing anything else.” Lucy said as she linked her left hand with Faye’s right.

“I feel like she has always meant to look like this. After the dozen of paintings you’ve shown us with her, this one is the only one that feels real. Feels like it is the truth.” Stella spoke while lacing her fingers to Faye’s left hand.

“I won’t need to paint her again I got her right. She’s on the right canvas now.” Faye smiled and squeezed her family’s hand. Faye wasn’t going to forget about her raven or the past that brought her to life but she was okay leaving her in the past now. Faye let go of her family and reached over to her brush and dipped it one last time in black paint and signed her name in the right corner sealing her raven into her life as a piece of her that was content without any more brush strokes.

Chapter Thirty-nine

The operation was to take place in two days and Drew had taken a leave of absences for the foreseeable future. He had passed all of the health checks and Monica was acting as his mental health sponsor and Drew was feeling content with the way things were taking shape. That was he would if the next few minutes went according to plan. Drew was only a few rooms down from Louis and he had spent the last few weeks non-stop by his bedside before he got his own bed at the hospital, but Drew had avoided the doubt that was tapping at the back of his mind. With the days counting down to the final moment Drew had to clear his conscience.

He knocked on Louis' door and Louis waved him in, "Season seven I think of Grey's Anatomy is on. I swore we were just on season four, but what do I know." Drew laughed and sat in his chair next to him.

"Louis bud, we got to talk about something that I can't stop thinking about."

Louis turned off the small wall mounted t.v. "Shoot."

"I need you to promise me something." Drew watches as Louis nods, "You got to promise not to ruin my liver too. If you make it out of the surgery fine and dandy then I need you to swear never to take another sip of alcohol. In all honesty I am not feeling okay risking my life for you if in two week, two year, or two decades, you just go and ruin your new liver. I will go with you to AA if that is what it takes. You can call me any time of the day of the year I'll listen. If I have to take a thousand jump seat rides to help you stay on the wagon and live then I will. But without you swearing that you will do this I don't want to give you my liver." Drew finished while looking down at his clasped hands.

Louis was appalled at Drew. "Are you serious? We are having an intervention right now and my *liver my life* is on the line."

"Louis man I mean it isn't like that." Drew tried to plead.

"You think I would drink after this? You think I would ever let another ounce of alcohol enter my body? I could have died twice now. I have a third trial in two days and well I'm beyond nervous that the third time is a charm thing applies to near death experiences to." Louis let out a shaking laugh. "I didn't realize I had to reassure you that I won't turn into a drunk again."

"Louis, you are the first to say that once a drunk always a drunk. I don't mean to say you can't fight it but I need to know you will."

Louis clasped his hand on Drew's shoulder, "Of course I am going to honor your wish. I plan on making you my emotional bitch for the rest of my life, my way of thanking you for saving my life."

Drew let out a relieved sigh and Louis squeezed his shoulder and let go. "Sorry for this man, nerves you know."

"You aren't going to die Drew."

"Just even the fact that I could and a decent statics says I might has made me jittery."

Louis sighed, "You don't have to do this you know, you can back out anytime Drew, I would understand and I wouldn't hold it against you."

"Shut up of course I'm not going to back out, I just needed you to agree to my, I guess conditions first."

"Then I agree, but Drew what else is bothering you, you're all shaky and wired."

Drew tried to brush off the comment but Louis kept pushing and after a few choice words Drew opened up. Drew explains how he never thought he might die with regrets. "I've lived most of my life doing what I wanted to some extent. I never had to pick between two things I really wanted other than Monica, but that worked itself out. I mean look at Mon and me now."

"Yea you act like your married again."

"Maybe we will end up getting remarried. I don't see why not now, enough time has passed and we both realized we are better off together. But really I guess I am shocked that I have one main regret."

"Faye?" Louis guessed.

"Faye." Drew agreed. "I almost feel too old to move on. I can go back to Monica but dating someone new, falling in love with a new body, new voice, and new memories does not appeal to me. I wanted to end my life with loving Faye and I ruined that so maybe I am going back to Monica because I know I can and I won't regret it. But if I could go back and make things work with Faye if I could take back the last four months of our relationship I would do it over and better."

"It was only a year." Louis stated with confusion.

"She was an eternity of experience balled into a year." Drew stood up and started pacing. "It was always new without the biting fear of the unknown. She shared this twisted past of hers and when I had waded through it all, her pure essence was left."

"What was that like?"

“Dew drops falling from the petals of the daffodil that survived a late spring frost. Strength of the stem springing back toward the sun and reawakening. It felt like that.”

Louis was silent and pictured what that must have felt to give up. The only thought Louis could take hold of was the bone crushing weight of Heather’s lifeless fingers. “I know that type of beauty.”

Drew looked over at Louis and saw how trouble had rode over his features. “Louis?” He blinked. “You regret anything?”

“Not anything but someone.” Louis smirked. “Not Danny, never Danny, and no you don’t really know him. What do you remember of New Years of ’05?”

Drew thought back to over ten years ago. He remembered a bar that more drugs than it was alcohol. He remembered Monica wearing next to nothing and how she gave him head on the way to the bar. “Us all hanging out and getting drunk.”

“Anything else involving Danny or me?”

Drew thought back, he had arrived a few minutes after Peter and Shania but before Danny. Danny showed up with a pre-drunk Abigail and Louis didn’t show up until half way through the night. “You were way late now that I think about it. Why was that?”

Louis explained how he had shown up only minutes after Danny but he had not shown up alone. “His name was Blake Briers and he was gorgeous. He worked at this bar I always went to out in Grand Rapids when Danny’s got too much. He had asked me out for a year straight and I was still hiding from everything so I kept telling him I wasn’t like that.”

“What changed?” Drew asked sitting back down next to Louis.

“I went in a few nights before New Year’s and I watched as he asked out this other guy, totally below his level and I just felt so disappointed. Disappointed that he was moving on or that he probably had already. So when I heard him ask what this random guy’s New Year’s plans were jumped into action.” Louis laughed. “It was pretty pathetic if you ask me.”

“What did you do?” Drew asked hiding a smile.

“I knocked over the guys drink next to me all over his lap and caused this huge scene.”

“Did it interrupt Blake?”

“Oh yea, got his full attention. He offered to buy the guy a new drink and he refused to talk to me the rest of the night but he also stopped talking to the other guy too. I wanted until he was about to get off of his

shift, which was a lot less creepy when I was in my twenties. I walked out with him and tried to start a conversation with him but he would not respond, he was pissed at me.” Louis closed his eyes thinking back a small smile gracing his lips. “I was a real jerk I kept pestering him all the way to his car. He turned around to face me before he unlocked it and I still remember what he said, *“I have a knife strapped to my leg if you don’t back the fuck off I will cut off your straight dick and feed it to you.”*

“Jesus, what did you like about this guy?”

“It was hot as hell, trust me. Anyways I just couldn’t let it go and I leaned in and kissed him. He was startled but he let me. I mean he had wanted me to kiss him for a year, I didn’t really think he would push me away. But eventually he did and he took a swing at me, I blocked it and kissed him again. He pushed himself off of me and called me an ass as he got into his car and drove away.”

“How did he end up coming to the bar with you?” Drew asked engrossed in the outcome.

“I went in the next day and ordered my usual and he smirked at me and in front of at least six other people he asked me to go to this *known* gay bar down the road when he got out. He thought I would freak out but I was ready for people to know. So I smirked right back at him and said yes if he paid. He blushed and we went and it was one of the best night of my life, even now. I remember how the bar smelled of peaches and piss. He danced on me and I was in my own skin for the first time. I asked him that nigh to meet all of you on New Year’s and he agreed. He spent the night with me and even though we did what I am sure you did in eight grade and agreed to take things slow I still can draw the freckled on his back.” Louis still had his eyes closed when Drew interrupted to ask,

“Why didn’t he make it?”

Louis cracked open one eye, “He did.” At Drew’s confused look he continued, “I walked in holding his hand and I ran into Danny while looking for you guys and he well flipped out. He shouted at us and said some choice words. I was started to say the least and Blake was not okay with how degrading Danny was. He told me he was leaving and either I could leave with him or I could stay and never come back to the bar. I went to leave with him Drew I did. But Danny well he grabbed my hand and pulled my ear to his lips. I’m not going to tell you what you said, but it was enough to tell Blake to go home. I guess I regret that. He felt right and I loved Danny so completely that I jumped at any chance back then to have any part of him.”

“Holy shit! Is that why Abigail couldn’t find Danny for like twenty minutes were you two doing—”

“Do you really want to know what Danny was doing to me in the back stall of the men’s bathroom?”

“No! I don’t” Louis laughed at Drew’s face as he pictured versions of what could have happened. After a few moments and a shake to clear his thoughts Drew looked up to where Louis was smiling like an idiot. “You know you are gross Danny isn’t even good looking.”

“He was perfect. But Blake was much more attractive yes.”

After both men laughed like children about their past antics Drew sobered up, “So you don’t regret Danny but you regret losing Blake...sounds familiar.”

“We are brothers for a reason.”

Drew smiled for a brief moment, “I haven’t been the best brother to you through all of this. I want to fix that. I didn’t mean to act so distant. I think I caused a lot of damage to the family leaving Monica the way I did, I’m sorry.”

Louis felt himself growing tired but it was more out of just how satisfied he felt getting so many things out in the open. “Drew, it doesn’t matter. You are more than making up for it now I reckon. I didn’t reach out like I should have either. I judged you that first year of the divorce I know you know I did.”

“I didn’t blame you.”

“You should.”

Silence falls over the brothers while both make a mental pact to never let anything separate the family, what is left of it, again. “We should invite Samson home for holidays sometimes his family isn’t much.”

“I’d love that, your family can be ours.”

Chapter Forty

Drew and Louis wake up that last morning thinking identical thoughts of this isn't how they expected to spend their fall. Both men received one last talk through of the next twenty four hours from their respective doctors. Risks and the last time to bow out, both signed a DNR agreement that morning and after a tearful call from Monica Drew sat back waiting for the nurses to collect him. Monica was catching the next flight out to regardless of the outcome take Drew and Louis home. Drew allowed himself for the first time since coming out to Montana to picture Faye and what she might at this moment look like. Would she have her hair piled into a mess on her head paint covering her knuckles and chin? Or would she have flannel pajamas on with wool socks while sipping on a glass of Cabernet laughing with Stella and Lucy. Drew cringed at thinking that maybe she was reapplying makeup in a bathroom at a restaurant because she actually liked this date and wanted him to think she was more put together than she believed she was.

Drew reached into his bag that was tucked under his hospital bed he pulled out his phone and dialing Faye's number he didn't know if he wanted her to answer or not. When it went to voicemail and the bile touched the back of his tongue he knew the truth, he wished she would have answered. He listened to her tell him to leave his name and number and she would call him back while wishing she actually would.

"Hey Faye it's me, Drew. I'm just calling to—" Why was he calling he wondered. "Say I'm sorry and that I want you to date someone better than me and Faye, know you are more than I could deserve." Drew went to hang up but then added in a forced whisper, "I still love you."

Louis felt the same urge to call someone but to his own surprise his fingers dialed Samson's number. A number he knew would go to voicemail. Samson was back on a case, it wasn't a full blown one but it was a protection detail for just shy of a month. Louis listened as Samson rattled on and he left a simple one liner, "Don't you go get yourself killed without me."

The nurses walked into both men's rooms and let them know that it is time to get going. Louis realizes that he needs to see Drew before. He isn't sure what the need is stemming from but as he tells the nurse to hold on, he holds close the back of his gown and walks towards Drew's room. Steps before the doorway Drew barrels out holding his own gown closed.

Both men look at each other and let out a nervous laugh, "This is it I guess." Louis asked.

"We got this, right?"

“Right.” Both men stare at each other before launching into a full body embrace, whispering good luck into ears, thinking of when they first met, and hands ignoring the feeling of bare backs.

The End.