

# That Eighteenth Summer



Raine O'Tierney



## Table of Contents

Love is an Open Road.....	4
That Eighteenth Summer – Information .....	7
Dedication .....	8
Acknowledgements.....	9
That Eighteenth Summer .....	10
Chapter One .....	11
Chapter Two.....	17
Chapter Three.....	23
Chapter Four .....	29
Chapter Five.....	34
Chapter Six.....	39
Chapter Seven .....	45
Chapter Eight .....	54
Chapter Nine .....	59
Chapter Ten.....	64
Chapter Eleven.....	69
Chapter Twelve.....	73
Chapter Thirteen .....	78
Chapter Fourteen.....	84
Chapter Fifteen.....	89
Chapter Sixteen.....	95
Chapter Seventeen .....	101
Chapter Eighteen.....	109
Chapter Nineteen .....	114
Chapter Twenty.....	120
Chapter Twenty-One.....	126

Chapter Twenty-Two ..... 132  
Chapter Twenty-Three ..... 138  
Chapter Twenty-Four ..... 141  
Chapter Twenty-Five ..... 148  
Chapter Twenty-Six ..... 154  
Epilogue ..... 159  
Author Bio ..... 161

# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## THAT EIGHTEENTH SUMMER

By Raine O'Tierney

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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# THAT EIGHTEENTH SUMMER

By Raine O'Tierney

## Photo Description

Two men snuggle together. One, dark haired, bearded, and wearing a gray Henley, sits on the floor, leaning against the foot of the bed. The other, also dark haired and dressed in jeans and a black sleeveless tee, lays his head on the first man's shoulder. Both have their eyes closed. There is a bold green and cream patterned bedspread on the bed. The early morning light perfectly accents the photograph.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*All my life I idolized my older brother. He was popular, always had pretty girlfriends, and was wicked smart. When he joined the military, I thought I would follow in his footsteps.*

*When I turned eighteen, the summer after graduating high school, the army men came to the door to deliver the blow. My brother was dead. When his best friend and fellow soldier came to his funeral, I felt like I had a part of my brother back. Someone I could talk too. Someone who understood the loss of my best friend and inspiration.*

*I had always hoped to be like my brother and have a hot girlfriend, so I don't understand why I am starting to feel something for this man. Why am I turned on? Why do I want to feel how soft his lips are?*

*Sincerely,*

*Dana*

## Story Info

**Genre:** new adult, contemporary

**Tags:** coming of age, disability, early 2000s, grief, hurt/comfort, in the closet, military men, tearjerker, virgins

**Content Warnings:** underage drinking, virgins barebacking

**Word Count:** 47,086

*Dedication*

For Debbie, who taught prepositions by example. She pulled me *through* self-doubt, led me *around* the pitfalls, and helped pick me *up* when I fell flat on my face time and time again.

*Acknowledgements*

A very special thank you to “Chandler” for teaching me by NON-example how to write kissing scenes that take place in cars, and “Michelle” for showing me the best way to paint my nails during my formative years—and to both of them for beta-reading this story.

I'd also like to thank (and hug!) “Craig” for being all he is. I'm so glad we found each other again.

# **THAT EIGHTEENTH SUMMER**

**By Raine O'Tierney**

## Chapter One

"I'm going to shine your black dress shoes, okay?" Mom asks instead of saying good morning.

I've only ever worn those shoes twice. Once to prom and then again to graduation. They don't fit right, and I always get a blister on my big toe when I'm forced to wear them for a while.

"Breakfast is on the table. Don't forget to eat. I don't know when we'll get to eat again. Busy day. Busy, busy day."

She's left Cheerios waiting for me on the kitchen table. I don't know when Mom poured them, but it must have been a while ago because they are soggy as hell. I poke at the mush.

"Do you know where your father is?" Mom continues. "Rather, I don't *need* him, I just need his shoes. I'm going to shine them as well."

"Mom," I ask quietly. "Why don't you go get dressed?"

She's still in her hose and slip. Her hair is in curlers. It's not like she's *naked* but it makes me uncomfortable that she's not all the way dressed. Today it's almost as if she's forgotten she needs to put the rest of her clothes on.

"Oh, I will," she assures me. "But we can't have you perform without spotless shoes."

"Right."

I manage to get a spoonful of cereal into my mouth. It's like oatmeal and it's a miracle I can even choke it down. She's poured sugar over the Cheerios, too, and now the milk's a sweet, warm mess with bits of what used to be the crunchy rings floating in it.

I push it away and stare at our table. Chrome-rimmed, lemon-yellow Formica with matching chairs. Dad's inheritance when Grandma passed away. I've looked at this table a thousand times before, but somehow today I'm *really* seeing it for the first time. There are glitter flecks in the tabletop, but they aren't silver, they are a different shade of yellow. How could I go eighteen years without noticing that?

"Are you ready to sing?" Mom asks. She's not looking me. She's kneeling in front of the sink with the brush and polish, scrubbing away at the shoes. They aren't even scuffed.

My stomach gets tight at the thought of singing in front of those people.

No.

*No, I'm not ready.*

"I will be."

"Want to practice?"

"No, Mom."

"Please?"

"Mom..."

"Just warm up your voice a little. It doesn't have to be *that* song. You can sing something else for me. How about 'I Love to Tell the Story'? You know how much I adore that one."

"I need to eat," I lie, trying to avoid looking at the bowl. Biting down on a shudder, I pull it back to me and lift it to my lips. I'm going to try and keep my teeth clamped shut so I don't get any Cheerio mush but can still drink the milk. We may not know when we're going to eat again today, but I know when I'll be throwing up if I have to force down those Cheerios.

"Or 'Morning Has Broken,'" Mom continues like she hasn't heard me. I honestly don't know that she has. "I like that one too."

The sound of the brush across the toe of the shoes has become almost hypnotic. *Tch-ch, tch-ch, tch-ch...*

"I think those shoes are ready for the rag, Mom. You might pull the leather *off* if you don't stop."

The sudden silence feels like an enemy.

"Oh!" Examining the shoes, she puts a hand to her temple, leaving a smear of black on her skin. "I've got to rub them down, don't I? Oh, what a ditz. I would have made the worst shoeshine boy."

She reaches in the cabinet under the sink and produces one of her cleaning rags.

"Can't sing if you don't have your shiny black shoes. Right?"

"Right, Mom."

"Ollie, can you go find your father?"

"Yes, Mom."

I'm grateful to get out of the kitchen, especially when Mom starts attacking the shoes with the rag. She seems so small.

I know exactly where Dad is—the same place he's been for the last three days. If I could avoid going out there, I would. But Mom's right, we've got to leave soon, and that means Dad needs a shower... finally. Shiny shoes are the least of his problems.

I slide open the patio door that leads onto the porch Paw-Paw built us when I was in the fifth grade. It's covered in potted plants now. Most of them are aloe. Mom says you can never have enough aloe—good for treating fire ant bites. I think she keeps them because they don't need much care.

It's really sunny this morning. Like mockingly sunny. It should be raining or at least overcast. But nope, the sun shines mercilessly down on us all. Especially Dad, who should probably be dead of heatstroke now.

I walk over to the wooden railing. The paint is cracked and peeling. If Paw-Paw were still alive, he would have repainted. Can't trust any of us bums to do things like that.

I lean against the banister.

"Dad?" I call cautiously.

No one's really tried to talk to him since our neighbor, Mr. Paice, walked over to the four-foot chain-link fence and asked Dad what he was doing. You've got to understand that for almost thirty-six hours Dad hadn't said anything to anyone. He'd been working, and when he wasn't working, he was sleeping in the hammock.

So when Mr. Paice asked that question, Dad put the shovel down, turned to him and said, *Well, Paice, I'm building a swimming pool.*

Mr. Paice is a nice guy. Never really done anything to us. He and Dad talk sometimes about how they wish Oklahoma had a professional basketball team.

*Doesn't look like any swimming pool I've ever seen, Frank.*

Well, Dad, with this totally spaced-out smile on his face (so says Mr. Paice who came to tell Mom about it) walks over, uncoils the hose, and sprays Mr. Paice until he takes off running into his house.

"Dad?" I call again.

He finally looks up. Sweat is dripping down his beet-red face and his pant legs are almost black from caked-on dirt. There are bug bites on his bare arms,

angry and welted, some he's scratched so hard he's made them bleed. All around him, all over our once beautifully manicured lawn, are holes. Some as shallow as a shovel full, some four feet deep.

"Dad, we have to get ready now."

"Ready?" he repeats. "No, I'm working."

He turns back to the hole he is digging, the end of the shovel striking the earth, pulling dirt away. He throws it over his shoulder. I watch him for a long time. It's such a simple movement, digging a hole. It makes me want to find a shovel and start tearing up the yard too. But I can't.

I need him. I need my dad. I don't think I can sing if Mom and Dad aren't in the front row looking back at me.

So I walk across the yard, acting more confident than I feel. I'm careful to avoid the fresh piles of dirt and pits, and I put my hand on Dad's shoulder. He stills. He might hit me with the shovel, I think. It's never been something he's done before. He's a quiet guy. I've never even heard him yell. But I think that taking him out of his trance, he might hit me.

"Ollie?" he says, blinking at me. I nod slowly.

"C'mon, Dad. Mom needs us to get going now."

\*\*\*\*

I've never liked performing in front of people, but this time I might full-on pee myself a little. There are so many faces out there, and it should be comforting that a bunch of them are faces I know. But it's not at all. What if I screw up in front of all my friends and family? And don't forget about all these military men. Jesus.

I have no accompaniment, so they wait for me to start.

I clutch my microphone and look at my mother who nods with expectant fervor, sending her bangs bouncing. I've got Limp Bizkit's "Re-Arranged" stuck in my head. Why don't you check out *my* melody, Fred Durst?

*Focus, Oliver.*

Mom smiles again—such a large, encouraging smile.

*A-mazing grace... how sweet the sound...*

*That saved a wretch like me...*

*I once was lost...*

*But now I'm found.  
Was blind...  
But now...  
I see.*

Good, I'm singing. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to start or worse, I'd start but I wouldn't be able to get Durst's voice out of my head.

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear.  
The hour I first believed.*

I can do this. I can make it through this! There are tears streaming down my face, but goddammit, I can do this.

And then I see the one face that can't comfort me. *His* face, so serene and peaceful. He looks beautiful, and suddenly I can't remember my verses. My voice cracks. I choke out a sob but press on.

*Wh-when we've... been th-there...  
Ten th-thousand years...  
Bright shi-ning...  
A-as the sun...*

Mom stands up. She's wearing a beautiful black dress I'd never seen before today. She turns to the room, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

"Thank you all so much for coming." She says this like she's a hostess at a party, and I choke off the song. "Benjam would have been so glad you could make it."

Dad tugs hard on Mom's arm and pulls her down into the pew. He says something to her I can't hear. People are whispering. *Everyone* is whispering, except the military men who keep their faces toward the front. And then I can't see anymore. My tears have blinded me.

I know they're staring at me. I step down, leaving my microphone on the podium. It makes a loud whine as it thumps against the wood.

Benjam...

His face is so serene.

Just like he's sleeping.

I touch the smooth sides of the coffin.

Benjamin.

Like he's sleeping.

Benjam.

Sleeping.

Just sleeping...

My idol, my best friend, my brother.

I take another step, but everything's swirling. It's so hot in here. *I sang, Mom. I sang for Benjam.* Everything goes black.

This is *not* where the story begins.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

I wake up to my radio alarm clock kicking on at 5:45 a.m.

I drag my ass out of bed and am standing under the spray of the shower—hair all sudsed up—before I realize I don't have to be awake. I don't have school today.

I don't have school again.

Ever.

I'm *done*.

It's Day One of the glorious bit of break that comes after being held prisoner for months on end. Except instead of having to voluntarily turn myself back into the warden at the end of the summer... I'm free!

Well, sorta.

The 'rents have other ideas, you know? Dad wants me to get a job, but Mom wants me to enjoy my last summer "as a kid" (uh, Mom, already an adult). They've been arguing about it for almost two months now.

Me? I want to enlist. I've been waiting for this since I was thirteen and my big brother Benjam went into the service.

Maybe it's being five years younger than him and always following in his shadow, but I have this dream of joining up, blowing everyone's minds, and then training for the Rangers.

Benjam wants to be a Ranger, too. But he sucks in the water and can't pass his RSAE. I'm a pretty okay swimmer, but I'm going to train my ass off at the Y. Drownproof myself. Learn all the basics, then learn them again in full clothing and boots.

But *after* I go back to sleep. It's only the first day of summer, and it's the ass crack of dawn after all.

\*\*\*\*

I tell my parents at lunch I'm ready to enlist. I don't expect Mom to be impressed (and she isn't) but I thought Dad might be proud. He wants me to get that job after all. What better job than serving your country, right?

Mom and Dad look at each other and then back at me.

“What?”

“We know joining the army is important to you, Ollie,” Mom starts.

“Yep...” I say slowly. “But?”

Dad chimes in, “Well, maybe there’s something to what your mom’s been saying. Maybe you should just take this summer off. Be a kid. Figure out your future.”

I stare at Dad, a little dumbfounded.

“Uh, I *have* figured out my future, Dad. I want to enlist.”

“Three months,” Mom says quietly. “You can wait three months, right?”

“What the hell’s gonna happen in three months?” I ask.

Dad tells me to watch my mouth in front of my mother, and I apologize. But the question is still out there. What’s taking the summer off supposed to do for me?

“There’s a *war* on, Ollie.”

“Right.” I nod. Like I don’t remember 9/11? I was in science class when the second tower got hit, for fuck’s sake. I watched it go down, live on television. And we were staring at the screen again last year, when the first bombs dropped in Afghanistan. The screen was black, a reporter would come in and say something quietly, almost reverently, and then nothing. Just the distant sounds of war. I haven’t forgotten. It’s all anyone talks about.

Well, that and the friggin’ price of gas.

My brother’s stationed in Afghanistan. But Benjam hadn’t enlisted so he could pick up girls with his dress uniform. He’d enlisted to protect our country. That’s what I want to do, too!

“Why join the service if you aren’t prepared to go to war?” I sound like an old man when I say this, and Mom starts to cry.

I hate when she cries. I hate it worse when I’m the one who makes her cry.

“Mom, please stop.” I’m pissed off. I feel like she’s using her tears against me, and now I’m going to be three more months behind Benjam, and he’s already got a five-year head start. “But if you guys are seriously going to make me ‘be a kid’ for the summer, that means I don’t have to get a job, right?”

It only takes two weeks before all my friends seem to just... evaporate. Everyone's still updating their Myspace pages, but no one wants to go out and do anything. They're all working at the mall, or starting internships, or they've got girlfriends, boyfriends, and pre-college hoopla, and the ones who aren't wrapped up in something are too stoned to be much fun.

I've pretty much got Chandler, when he's off work, Craig when he answers the phone, and then there's Elizabeth. We're friends, don't get me wrong. But if I *wanted* to get rid of Elizabeth, I couldn't. I'm like fly paper for Elizabeth, and she's stuck good.

Which is okay, I guess.

Sometimes it would be nice to *not* hear from Elizabeth though.

"Want to go see a movie?" She calls at least one time a day—usually two or three or four. She always wants to *do* something. I mean, I want to go out and do something too sometimes, but this girl is ridiculous.

*Want to go to the movies?*

*Want to go out to eat?*

*Want to go to the mall?*

*Want to...?*

And she always expects me to pay.

Like a girlfriend, except I get no play from Elizabeth.

We weren't close until senior year, when things finally clicked.

See, my spot used to be next to the vending machine outside the theater. I'd go there before class or during free period, put my headphones on, and read comics. Eat cookies if they had them in the cafeteria.

That's where she found me.

I'd seen her, of course. Who hadn't seen her? She was hard to miss. Heavy girl, huge boobs, glitter makeup, flowing skirts, lots of bangles, and a pair of clogs that she'd written on in paint pens: *Gypsy*.

She asked me what I was listening to. Godsmack. Then after school she sent me a message through Myspace. She'd changed the first song on her profile to "Whatever" and what did I think about that?

*I think we're friends for life*, I wrote back.

I don't know about life, but we've been friends for about a year now.

She's got me on the phone again this afternoon, desperate to go out. To do something.

"We could get some Chinese first?"

"I was thinking I might just lie here staring at the ceiling..." I reply, my eyes tracing the patterns made by the popcorn-y lumps.

"Um, yeah, that sounds super fun. Get your ass up and come see a movie with me."

"What's playing?"

"*The Matrix Reloaded.*"

"Saw it with Craig."

She makes a *tsk* noise. "The second *X-Men* movie?"

"Also with Craig."

"I think *Down with Love* is still out. You can't tell me you went and saw that with Craig?"

"Nope," I reply. "But I don't want to see it either."

She lets out an annoyed groan. "You're impossible."

"Nah, not *impossible*. Maybe just difficult."

"Well, what *do* you want to do?"

"Stare at the popcorn stuff on my ceiling?"

"Forget it. I have other friends, you know!"

"I'm sure you do," I say in an even way I know will piss her off. I love pissing her off. It's funny.

"Well, I have Michelle but she's on a fucking cruise. *Please*, Ollie, I'm bored and I'm hungry and I want to go get Chinese food."

"Call Craig."

"He doesn't like Chinese. He always gets the chicken wings and fries and then picks at them. Who goes to a Chinese buffet and gets wings and fries? That's criminal."

"Yep."

She lets out a long, low sigh, before finally saying, "Fine, can I come stare at the popcorn ceiling with you?"

"Sure, why not?"

\*\*\*\*

"Are you checking your Myspace *again*?" Elizabeth groans. "She doesn't even know you exist, you know."

Elizabeth has kicked me off my bed, taking over the whole thing for herself.

"Would you shut up? You're really a downer."

"I'm just saying, your passive-aggressive bulletins trying to get her attention haven't done shit for you. And what was it you tried last time? The *Hey, what's up hotness?* mail that she never replied to?"

"Seriously. If you aren't going to be helpful, you can just go home."

"Ooh," Elizabeth jabbed deeper. "Put her in your Top Eight, maybe she'll notice you then."

I grab one of the pillows she kicked onto the floor when she flopped on my bed and chuck it at her. It misses by a mile.

She's talking about Kirsten Daughtry, this girl from our class who has like seven billion friends. Her Top Eight? Number one is her best friend, Drea, and the rest are guys. Older guys. Really good-looking guys.

My brother Benjam has always had hot girlfriends like Kirsten. I think he was dating a couple of girls when he left for Basic Training. I don't know who he's seeing now. Probably some hot Afghan chick.

It's a fantasy of mine that I'll have a girlfriend before I leave for basic. I want a girl to get really upset over me.

She'll cry and want to get it on and stuff, because I'm risking my life for my country. I keep hinting about that in my updates—*Three more months until I enlist... Benjam, I'm joinin' ya, bro... Gotta fight the good fight.*

So far, no bites.

"Hey, check mine, will ya?" Elizabeth asks.

She gave me her passwords right after we first became friends so I'd check her Myspace, Xanga, and LiveJournal when her mom would take away her modem as punishment for whatever trouble she'd gotten herself into. She used

to call after midnight, all sleepy, and ask me to check up on the goings-on out there on the Internet.

“And check my mail, too, would you?” she asks.

“Yes, master. Right away, master.”

“Well, we wouldn't be sitting here playing with Myspace and staring at the ceiling if you'd go see a movie with me.”

“Yep.”

“Am I still number one on Michelle's Top Eight? Or did she move me?”

“Jesus, hold on. I haven't even typed your username in yet.”

She's as patient as usual, bugging me about eight more times about Michelle and her stupid Top Eight before the page even loads. I remind her that her best friend *is* on a cruise to the Carribean and probably has better things to do than remove her from her Top Eight. She scoffs.

“Yes. You are still her Number One. Are you happy?”

“Good. And yes.”

“Is that all?”

“Well, do I have any messages?”

“What? Like Chandler wants to go see *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* with you?”

She sits straight up on the bed. “Really?!”

“No. Christ. Calm down.”

“Hey, don't fuck with me, Oliver. I'm going to wear him down eventually.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.”

“He sent me an Alison Krauss song the other day.”

“It's true love.”

“What would you know about it?” she snaps.

“I know he's just not into you, Elizabeth. Move on.”

“Whatever. I'm going to marry him someday. Now check my mail, please, before I literally *die*.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

The last time I saw my friend Frances, she wanted me to drive her to the New Age store near the mall. She called me out of the blue, just to see if I would take her.

“Yes,” I said without hesitation.

There's something about Frances I can't quite describe. I've always liked being around her. Not in a *get in her pants* sort of way, though she's almost too fucking hot to describe. Crazy Hot Topic redhead with boobs like what. But there's more to it. I feel like Frances might be wearing the key to the universe around her neck and if I'm nearby when she's feeling up to it, she might just open the door and let me peek inside.

No, I'm not high. Shut up.

I met Frances during my sophomore year. She wrote stories (usually featuring David Bowie in some way or another), and she'd let me take them home and read them. I think I still have a couple, hole punched and bound with yarn somewhere in my desk.

Frances used to say we should go to New Orleans and visit. Just like that. I wasn't even sixteen years old at the time, but she made it seem like it was possible. We'd just get in that Camaro of hers—the black one with the purple stripe—and we'd drive down to New Orleans, because... why not?

The why not, if you're wondering, is my mother.

She'd have murdered me twice over if I went on a road trip like that when I was fifteen years old.

But I'm not fifteen years old anymore. I'm eighteen, and if I'm “being a kid” this summer, a road trip is not off the table.

Unfortunately, going with Frances probably is.

Before school was even over, she graduated early, threw her stuff in the back of that Camaro and took off for Ohio, just because she could.

I live for her LiveJournal and the adventures she posts.

If I do end up on the road, it's going to have to be with someone else. Chandler could probably take off from Arby's if I give him enough notice. I

don't think Craig has found work yet. And of course, if all else fails, there's always Elizabeth.

She's probably driving over here right now just because I *thought* about planning something.

I need to get one of those travel guides. Maybe the library has something? *50 Things to Do in New Orleans When Ya Don't Know Your Head from Your Ass.*

I have a feeling Mom is going to disapprove. Or give me that look.

I may tell her we're going to Branson instead.

\*\*\*\*

"You know," Elizabeth says cheerily. "I think we should *absolutely* go to New Orleans. You want to do it right now? Like right this second? I've got a couple hundred dollars in the bank account. We'll have to share a bed."

"I like that you immediately went there."

"Shut up, pervert. I don't mean like *that*."

"Wow, shut a guy down, why don't cha, Elizabeth?"

She giggles. We're good.

"So who else is coming? We could just make it you and me."

I don't tell her that the thought of driving from Oklahoma City to New Orleans—just the two of us—with her talking and talking and *talking* is enough to make me want to preemptively end the friendship. I need a buffer. And some testosterone.

"I thought we'd ask Craig."

"Ooh, good idea."

"And Chandler."

She begins to giggle hysterically. This goes on for almost a full thirty seconds, and each time she tries to get a grip on herself, the giggling just gets louder.

"Seriously, if you're going to do that, I'm not inviting him."

"*Whatever*. You're inviting him."

"You're a mess, you realize that, right?"

“Take a chunk out of my fat ass, Ollie.”

“Chomp.”

\*\*\*\*

Tonight at dinner, I decide to broach the subject. I've already sent a message to Benjam to see if he wants me to bring him back anything from New Orleans. If he's not on the move, I'll usually hear back from him within a day or two.

“You guys ever take a road trip after high school?”

I've been working on the casual, *What? This is totally just a question. No ulterior motive* tone in my voice.

“I went to Hawaii with some friends after college,” Mom says thoughtfully, cutting a small chunk off her pork chop. “But not high school.”

“Dad?”

“Nope. Busy working.”

*Like I should be...* Yeah, we all know how you feel, Dad.

“See, the thing is... I'm thinking about putting together a little road trip with some of my friends. Nothing huge, just a couple of days. Maybe a week.”

Mom considers me for a moment, and I can tell she's torn between knowing she can't tell me what to do anymore, and wanting to play the *While you live under my roof, you will have no fun...* card.

“Me, Chandler, and Craig.”

Elizabeth is over here all the time, but maybe if I leave out the “girl plus hotel room” and definitely the “girl plus someone shares a bed with said girl,” she'll be more inclined to give her Mom seal of approval.

“Where?”

“Branson.”

Good family fun. They don't call it “Clean Vegas” for nothing.

Mom's eyes light up. “Oh, I love Silver Dollar City! Are you sure you don't want to take your mom with you instead?”

“Uh, pretty sure, Mom.”

She sighs heavily. “I'd be a fun date.”

“Okay, you’re making me more certain by the second.”

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A week later and everything’s a go! Parents sufficiently placated. Money secured. Even Craig and Chandler are on board. Craig was easy to convince. He—like me—is not doing much this summer, except instead of waiting around to enlist, he’s waiting around for college to start and drawing his comics. He’s got this awesome series that features a lot of his friends. I’m in there, of course.

Chandler was a bit more of a challenge.

The guy can be stubborn as an ass, which, incidentally, is why he flat-out refuses to date Elizabeth. I think he likes her, but she’s too in his face. If I thought for a second she’d listen, I’d tell her to try backing off and giving him space, and then he’d probably be all over her. But Chandler isn’t the only stubborn ass I know.

“I’m not sharing a bed with Elizabeth,” he tells me after taking *three days* to think the trip over.

“You don’t have to. We’ll get a cot. There’s going to be a couch. And she’s impervious to my charms, so I think we’ll be safe in bed together.”

It’s a joke, I’ve never made a move on Elizabeth before, but if I did, she’d probably swoon.

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I get on LiveJournal to see what Frances is up to. She and her Camaro have been on my mind since I started planning the trip. Maybe I want to impress her a little. *Hey, remember when we said we’d go to New Orleans? Guess what, beautiful?*

But a quick glance at her blog tells me I’ve been *so* outdone.

She’s going to Australia.

For the hell of it.

And while she’s there, David Bowie is going to be playing a concert. She wants to get him to autograph her back and then she’ll get the signature tattooed on.

I go to comment, but “Branson” is now a distant memory. Picking my favorite icon, the one of Conan O’Brien doing his “In the Year 2000” bit, I sit and stare at the blank space where my response should go.

*Hey Frances, this is amazing! I always knew you were going to do great things!*

Jesus.

No, that sounds stupid.

*Hey Frances, is it true water flows backward down there?*

Honestly, Ollie?

I finally settle on, *Send me a postcard, Frances, will you?*

I make a point of announcing on Myspace that I'm going on a road trip (FUCK YEAH!) with my friends. I hope Kirsten sees *that!* You could be going to New Orleans too, princess!

My excitement is short-lived though. When I go to her page—quickly closing down Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" (that's new, it was "Miss Independent" by Kelly Clarkson yesterday) I realize Kirsten has changed her Top Eight. Drea isn't her Number One anymore... some guy with no shirt is.

I fucking want to kill that guy.

The phone rings next to my desk. I snatch it off the hook. "What?"

"Wow." It's Elizabeth. Of course it's Elizabeth, who else would it be? "Nice to talk to you too, Ollie."

"This isn't a good time."

"O... kay," she draws. "But, I think you're going to want to hear this."

"If you're calling about Kirsten's goddamn Myspace account, I already saw."

"Myspace?" she repeats in a really poor attempt at sounding sincere. "No, I was just calling to..."

"Good-bye, Elizabeth."

"Wait! Don't you want to talk about it?"

I stand up, full of energy I have no use for. I should go run laps. I've been sitting on my ass for too long anyway. I'm supposed to be training, getting ready to enlist, right? How did I lose sight of my goal—and for a summer vacation? Really?

What the hell was I thinking, planning a stupid road trip?

This is bullshit.

It's *all* bullshit.

"It may not mean anything," she insists. "He could just be a friend."

"Yeah, thanks. I'll take your placations under advisement."

My telephone cord stretches all the way to the window, and I lay my head against the pane.

"You don't have to be a jerk."

"Sorry," I mutter. But I'm not really feeling sorry at all.

I can see our street from my window. It's quiet except for a lady who walks past with her dog. When I was a kid, my friend Nick and I went up and down this street, knocking on doors, trying to see if someone would let us walk their dog for a dollar. One dude actually laughed in our faces. Failed entrepreneurs.

A light breeze blows, rustling the leaves in the bush out front. I really should get out there and do something—at least head down to the Y for some swim practice. But right as I'm about to tell Elizabeth I'm going, I see movement coming from the end of the street. I don't know why I stare except it seems so dark compared to how bright the day is.

It's just a car.

Black.

With black tinted windows.

But it's driving slowly, as if casing the houses, and I find myself curiously drawn to it.

As it gets closer and I can see it more clearly, I realize I recognize the shape. I recognize the plates.

*Oh God.*

It's a government vehicle.

I can hear Elizabeth through the speaker. She's been rambling—exasperated—but I can't understand what she's saying. I don't know that she's speaking English. Or anything from planet Earth.

"Elizabeth?" I whisper, before letting the phone clatter to the floor.

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## Chapter Four

I know everything about these men before they even open their mouths. An NCO and a chaplain, both in their Class A uniforms. The NCO's eyes are red-rimmed. Seeing that makes me choke up. He's already been crying. It makes his eyes really green.

I look at the chaplain. He isn't speaking, but I wish he would. He's obviously more practiced at this than the non-com.

I'm trembling, waiting for them to say it. There's a template they are supposed to follow, I read it in the army regulations. It's morbid but I know the exact reg manual. AR 600-8-1. Geeky, right? Some kids grow up loving dinosaurs or Legos, superheroes or cars, me and Benjam? We love the United States Army. Enough to have read the army regs cover to cover.

*"The Secretary of the Army has asked me to express his deep regret that your (relationship; son, John or husband, Edward; and so forth) (died/was killed in action) in (country/state) on (date). (State the circumstances.) The Secretary extends his deepest sympathy to you and your family in your tragic loss."*

"Mr. Hannigan?"

I nod dumbly.

"May we come inside?"

More dumb nodding. Idiotic nodding even.

They're speaking, but I can't hear them. I can't hear anything. I watch their mouths, but I was never good at lip reading. Tricked by good ol' *Olive Juice*, you know?

"I'm gonna get my mom."

I must have walked because suddenly I'm in the kitchen. Blink. Transportation. I'm there. Were the lights always this bright? She's sitting at the table, balancing the checkbook. She looks up at me and smiles for a moment. The smile hangs and then drops. A deep, concerned frown forms on her face.

"Mommy?"

It comes out as a squawk.

I haven't called her "Mommy" since I was ten and I broke my arm falling out of a tree, and even then it was embarrassing. But right now, I can't think of anything else to call her.

She stands up so fast the chair topples over and lands on the linoleum.

"Ollie?" she asks. "Are you all right?"

"There's some... some men... here..."

Mom tells me to wait in the kitchen, but I don't want to be alone. I wish I could say I don't want to leave *her* alone, but no. This is me. Oliver Hannigan, eighteen years old and cowardly.

I follow her into the living room and sit on the arm of the recliner, rocking it back and forth nervously.

Where's Dad?

Work. He's at work.

Should I call him? But I can't leave.

I focus on their uniforms. I love military uniforms. I've been obsessed with them since I was a kid and my dad bought me a visual encyclopedia of uniforms from around the world. One of the most recent Internet searches I did was "United States Military Uniform Regulations." AR 670-1, *Uniforms and Insignia Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia*, updated last summer, July 1, 2002.

I sent Benjam an e-mail last year and let him know I'd found the updated version online. Freaking nerding out everywhere. His reply was short but it made me laugh:

*Now you're ready for laundry duty, kid.*

I'm ready for laundry duty.

I'm ready for laundry duty, Benjam. So come home, you asshole and I'll wash your uniform.

They wear army green. You can tell it's Class A because they have their coats on, even though it's so damn hot outside. A bow tie would make it a dress uniform. I can't tie ties. Mom still has to do it for me. If they were wearing bow ties... they'd be here for a whole different reason.

*Mrs. Hannigan, we've come to invite you to an award ceremony in honor of Sgt. Benjamin Hannigan. He's alive and well and smiling. Why wouldn't he be? We're wearing our bow ties.*

Mom is tearing her fingernails off while she nods at whatever they are saying. One at a time, she digs her thumb into a nail on her left hand, making it crack, and then ripping it off before starting over. The nails fall onto our clean carpet.

Do the officers notice?

She's embarrassing us.

I want to clean her nails off the floor, but if they haven't noticed, they will then.

"How did it happen?" My voice is too loud, like when you shut off the engine but you've left the radio turned up full blast and then when you start the car in the morning, you blow your eardrums out.

I drive a 1993 powder-blue Chevy Lumina. My parents gave it to me when they bought the Civic. It's a good car, but the radio is wonky. Elizabeth stuck a bobby pin up under the power button to get it to stay on.

Oh, they're looking at me.

I blink.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't hear you."

*I wasn't listening. I don't want to listen.*

"Hostile fire." The NCO might have a nice voice, if it weren't trembling. Doesn't he know AR 600-8-1 says to maintain a "soldierly appearance" at all times? "RPG attack."

I look over at Mom who is pale. The chaplain helps her to take a seat on the couch, asking quietly if there is someone from her faith that they should call. A pastor, a priest, a rabbi...

Oh, that's the start of a joke, isn't it?

The thought of a missile hitting my brother directly streaks through my brain. I can't stop it. I can't stop the thought of him being blown into a million bits. I can't stop imagining what that would look like. I try to think of something else, and the thoughts grow even more vivid.

Out there in the desert, on top of a hill of sand, some fucking terrorist raises his grenade launcher and points it right at Benjam. I shudder at the thought of

all that rocket power. Right there on the bastard's shoulder. The kick when it's launched? The heat that radiates from the weapon? The smoke that plumes?

And that huge missile streaks right toward my brother.

Blows him away.

To bits.

To smithereens.

*Smithereens.*

My brother is smithereens.

Mom is sobbing uncontrollably, her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. I wish I could fix it. I wish I could help her stop crying. But then I'd have to stop crying myself first.

"We need his body," she cries. "Where's his body? Where's my baby's body?"

"Ma'am," the NCO says. "You'll have a CAO assigned to you who will handle all of this. I promise."

"What?" Mom's voice is rising in level. "What is that? Who is that? When?"

"Casualty Assistance Officer."

"I want his body. *Now.*"

"You guys don't have all the pieces, do you?" I whisper it at first, afraid of what they will say. They're not supposed to discuss the gory bits. But then again, the non-com isn't supposed to cry, or stutter, or use acronyms.

The chaplain looks at me, clearly surprised by my question. It takes him only a second to fix his features.

"Sgt. Hannigan's remains are... intact."

"Then how did he die?"

"Hostile fire, RPG—"

"What does that *mean*?"

"It means there was an attack on the sergeant's camp. He was killed by shrapnel when an RPG hit. It tore through his stomach, puncturing several of his major organs and—"

Mom howls and the NCO realizes what he's done. He tries to hold it together.

Now she's going to think of Benjam like that for the rest of her life, with those bits of metal and rock tearing through him. She will be haunted by it. But for me, the officer's words save me. My brother is still dead, still gruesomely taken from me, but I won't spend my nights wondering if pieces of him were left behind in Afghanistan.

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## Chapter Five

I remember I was singing.

I remember seeing Benjam's face in the casket.

Then I don't remember anything again until the sound of gunshots almost send me flying off my chair. I look around. My family is sitting in the front row of a set of white chairs. There's a green carpet under us. Benjam's casket is closed, and his flag is draped over it. The wind rustles the grass in the cemetery, quiet except for us.

The Honor Guard stands at the ready, obeying their NCO.

*Ready!*

*Aim!*

*Fire!*

A three-volley salute for Sgt. Benjamin Hannigan.

With each round of gunfire, my whole body shakes. It's so loud my eardrums ring, but I never want it to stop. I want them to shoot the sky to the ground. But they're only shooting blanks.

As the last round dies away, a man with a trumpet begins to play "Taps" and Mom loses it. She begins to wail, falling out of her chair onto that awful green felt beneath our feet. People get up to help her.

They take the flag off Benjam's coffin, folding it with the precision and care due the symbol. That sounds cheesy, but I mean it with my whole heart. When we were kids, Benjam and I used to practice folding the flag.

I swallow hard on the lump in my throat.

Nothing we ever did looked as beautiful as what those men offer to my mother and father. Dad turns his face away, his body tight, but Mom, who has been returned to her chair, takes the flag as if it were Benjam himself and cradles it to her chest.

If I could trade places with Benjam, I would.

I'm pretty sure I'm already dead anyway.

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I've found myself a nice spot away from all the noise of the reception. There's food inside the reception hall—my aunt's fried chicken, even, but I'm not hungry. In fact, seeing the food just reminds me of the Cheerios from this morning, and it all makes me sick.

Benjam and I used to love funeral food. I know that sounds ridiculously morbid. But when someone not super close to us would die—a friend of Paw-Paw's or something—and we were dragged to the funeral as kids, at least we knew there were going to be good eats.

My brother used to say he wanted macaroni and cheese at his funeral. He used to joke about it because he was never going to die, so why not?

Now I think there are twenty goddamn bowls of mac'n'cheese in that reception hall. All different flavors. The Kraft kind that comes in the box, the homemade kind Grandma used to bake with Velveeta, even Stouffer's with the crumbs on top.

If only Benjam were here to enjoy all that dairy.

There are too many people in there. Too much buzzing. Like a million bees doing what bees do. Everyone has a specific job. Talk about Benjam. Remember. Laugh. Cry. Eat macaroni.

But what the fuck is my job?

Besides fainting in front of my friends, my family, and a bunch of servicemen my brother respected.

I'm a mourner, right?

That's my job.

So what does that look like?

Mom's back to acting like she's hosting a dinner party. Dad would rather be digging holes in our back yard. And there's me. I'm the kid, the child, the one who was supposed to take the summer off, and just be young for three months.

But I'm carrying the whole load, and all I want to do is check my e-mail for a letter from Benjam. See what he has to say about my road trip to New Orleans. Ask him for advice.

Benjam would know what to do. He'd have some great one-liner about Mom and Dad. Something like...

Well, it would say...

I can't think of anything. My mind is a total blank. I can't think of one goddamn thing that Benjam would say to me!

Do you know why?

Because *Benjam isn't here*.

He isn't fucking here.

"Mind if I sit down?"

I saw the man walking up out of the corner of my eye, but I was hoping he wasn't going to stop. A soldier in his army green. Class A uniform, of course.

I grunt because my throat is so tight with anger that I don't know how to make any other noise. The soldier sits down next to me on the stone bench, stretching his legs out in front of him. They're long, those legs.

"You're Oliver, right?"

I nod.

*Don't tell me you're sorry for my loss. Don't you dare.*

He's got fifty pounds on me easy, and no doubt it's all muscle, but I think I'll come up off the bench and try to hit him if he says he's sorry for my loss.

"Couldn't stand the noise in there," he says. "I had to get out."

I don't reply, but I take the opportunity to look at his uniform. He's got an impressive number of ribbons. I'm trying to remember what they all mean. If you'd asked me last week, I could have listed every single one of them for you without blinking.

But that was 2003 B.B., *Before Benjam*.

Some people know the books of the Bible from memory. I have (had?) the order of U.S. military decorations (by importance) memorized.

Medal of Honor... Distinguished Service Cross... Navy Cross... Air Force Cross... Defense Distinguished Service Medal... The Silver Star is in there somewhere. God. Where's my brain gone?

And now the damn *colors* confuse me.

I do recognize two things right away, though. This soldier has a ribbon representing his Purple Heart, and he's wearing three Marksman badges.

"Admiring my bling?" he teases, which I think is a really irreverent thing to say. He has a Distinguished Rifleman badge, a Distinguished Pistol Shot badge,

and an Expert Marksman badge, complete with three clasps. I'm sure he has more. None of those came easily.

"You're an expert marksman?"

"Yep," he replies. "But in a way I wish I were a sharpshooter. Just sounds better."

What the hell is wrong with this guy?

"How'd you know Benjam?" I mutter. I'm curious, but I don't want to seem too curious, especially since I was doing perfectly well being grumpy by myself. I don't need someone trying to cheer me up.

"We served together on my second tour in Afghanistan."

I wonder if I know him. I look up, study his face for a second. He's good looking—but who isn't in a dress uniform? Hazel eyes, a smile that seems sad. Benjam didn't mention a whole lot of guys by name, usually just called them "The Boys" in his e-mails, but there were a few.

"So, you remember I said I couldn't stand the noise in there? That's not exactly all of it. I get that all those folks loved Hannigan, but I just need to be a little selfish for a while."

"What do you mean?"

"He was my best friend," the soldier says. "Like a brother, and I never had a brother before. Guess I don't feel like they can really understand how I'm feeling. And the whole thing feels sorta..."

"Irreverent?" It's the same word I just used for him.

"Yep."

"I'm his brother." Of course he already knows this. He knew my name before he sat down. "Did you come looking for me? To talk about Benjam?" The anger that came over me earlier has faded, and I'm left feeling woozy now.

"Nah. Bonus that you're out here. But I can leave you alone if you need it. Didn't mean anything by the brother bit. Just that Hannigan was important to me."

"It's fine," I say, and strangely it is. I think any other day it would have pissed me off to have someone else consider Benjam their brother. Today though? I'm just glad he's not offering his condolences. I've heard the word so many times it doesn't mean anything anymore. "What's your name?"

"Luca Santini."

“Oh. I *do* know you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“‘The Great Santini.’ My brother e-mailed me about you, but he said you...” I trail off and let my eyes run down the sleeve of his well-pressed jacket. There on the bench next to me, he’s balled his hand into a fist. Except it’s not like any hand I’ve ever seen up close. It’s made of metal.

“What’d he say?” Luca’s voice is light, affable. “That I got myself discharged with a lil’ scratch. Fucking IEDs.”

“He wrote about you a lot,” I say quietly. I’m embarrassed about his arm, and look away.

“And he told me a lot about you,” Luca offers in return. “Guess that means we’re already ahead of the curve on the ‘how do you dos.’”

\*\*\*\*

I should have told Mom and Dad I was leaving, but they are so fucking gone right now that I don’t think it would have mattered. It’s too hot to stay outside and neither Luca nor I wanted to go back in, so I suggested a drive.

“Assuming you’ve got a car?”

“Are you asking if I can drive with ol’ steel arm, here?”

I blush because, no, I wasn’t asking that at all. “Benjam said you were from Kansas or something?”

“Missouri.”

“Right. So I didn’t know if you drove down here. Or caught a ride with some of the other guys or...”

Luca chuckles and says, “Don’t take me too seriously, Ollie. I kid about the arm a lot. It’s a coping mechanism. And I flew down—got a rental—and yeah, let’s take a drive. You can tell me some of the stuff about Hannigan that he kept secret.”

My heart seizes at the thought of talking about Benjam, but as I look up at Luca and our eyes meet, I feel my resistance give a little. People have been trying to get me to open up about my feelings for days. But Luca isn’t asking about *me*. He’s asking about *Benjam*, and that makes all the difference in the world.

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## Chapter Six

We drive forever.

Whatever street I tell Luca Santini to take, he takes, wherever I tell him to turn, he turns, and every time I see somewhere that reminds me of Benjam, we slow down, and I tell my story. Even if it's an idiotic one.

"That used to be an M&M's."

"M&M's?"

"Movies & Music—they had a tent sale about eight years back, in the parking lot, and Benjam stole a Crash Test Dummies cassette."

"Scandal." Luca laughed. "They should never have let him join up."

"And that's our Taco Bell. Before he could drive us, we used to walk all the way from the house with three bucks in change—literally found under the bed and in couch cushions—and each get a chili cheese burrito. Plus a water, of course."

"Wait, wait, wait, back up, you went from Hannigan's thievery straight to burrito munching."

"I can't help it," I say. "I'm just telling you where the landmarks take me."

"Dude, you guys have a Braum's?"

"Yeah. I don't really have a Benjam story about that one, but I'll buy you a shake for driving me around."

He gets chocolate chip cookie dough, I get plain old vanilla—but the creamy sweetness hits my stomach like a sugar brick and I can't handle more than a few sips. I set it in the drink holder and tell him to loop around and back to our neighborhood.

We drive the long way through.

I point out the former houses of Benjam's old friends, the ones he's had since I was a baby. All the guys from the neighborhood. The prepubescent gamer nerds turned grown men with wives. A lot of them are back at the reception. Some he lost touch with. But I remember them all as they were.

At the very back of the subdivision is a park and that's where I direct Luca. It's the culmination of what we've always called the greenbelt route—a mile-

long walking trail with trees lining either side. But it's not the sidewalk trail or the merry-go-round I want to show Luca.

It's something special.

"C'mon," I say when he pulls into a parking spot. I jump out of the car, a manic sort of energy taking hold of me. I *need* to show someone else this.

A mother and her two kids are over at the swings, and they eye us as we go running past in our good clothes. My polished shoes, Luca in his pants and white dress shirt. I've warned him he might get dirty, so he left the jacket in the car. There's no opening to distinguish where I want us to go through. Usually Benjam and I start at the other end of the greenbelt. *Started*. It's so hard to think of him as *gone*.

"You're gonna have to trust me on this," I tell Luca.

"I trust you."

"Horrible mistake, I'm probably going to get you lost."

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We are almost certainly trespassing.

I don't know if this wooded area belongs to the subdivision, the city, the apartments on the other side of the stream, or no one. I like to believe it's no one. Or better, I like to believe it's mine and Benjam's.

We found it one day, when we were walking along the greenbelt, and Benjam wanted to follow the stream that fed off of the turtle pond. I was probably nine at the time—Benjam was fourteen.

I remember the turtles were out sunbathing on a log in the middle of the water. Four in a row, with their necks stretched out. And if you watched them long enough, you could see one of them plop right into the water.

I'm telling Luca all of this as we make our way through the woods. The underbrush rustles as we move through it, and we're definitely going to pick up ticks and chigger bites and maybe worse.

"So I followed him down the hill to the stream," I continue. "There were all the things boys love down there, you know? Frogs and bugs and snakes. And when we're in the woods, Benjam makes me play lookout because he's got to take a crap, and there's no way he'll make it home in time. Except he thinks he's going on a rock, and then it moves."

“Turtle?” Luca guesses.

“Turtle,” I agree.

His laughter disturbs the birds, and I hush him, out of habit. He slaps his hand over his mouth but can't quite stifle the giggles. This handsome army man giggling at the thought of my brother shitting on a turtle does me in, and then suddenly I'm giggling too. Giggling and trying to hush myself.

“We-we have to be *quiet!*” It's all part of the experience of being in these woods. The sneaking. We're adults. If we get caught, we'll just say, *Oh, sorry, didn't realize*. But as kids, Benjam and I saw it as real danger. *Plus*, a chance to play Rangers. And that meant moving in stealth.

It takes Luca and me a long time to get ourselves under control and back on the path.

I say the path, but it's been years since I've been here. I don't even know it's still standing. They could have cleared it out or it could have rotted away. Or...

I slow and Luca slows with me.

“There it is.”

I don't know if it will bear our weight. But there's no way I'm not trying.

“It's gorgeous,” Luca says quietly.

“We used to call it God's Bridge, because the first time Benjam and I found it, there was this awesome shaft of light cutting through the treetops right down on it. I remember it being really golden, but that might be my memory.”

“I bet it was golden.” Luca is nice. I like him a lot. “We climbing over it?”

“Hell yes,” I breathe.

I go first—that way if the huge downed tree *is* rotten, I'll be the one who falls in the water. I can get the shoes muddy. I'd rather Luca not have to shell out dry-cleaning money for his uniform.

I feel like a kid again as I hoist myself up on the log. The bark is hard, except where moss has grown over it. I crawl on my hands and knees and am happy 'cause it hasn't rotted away too much, and it seems to be bearing my weight.

“You coming?”

I look back and watch as Luca uses his good arm to pull himself up and his prosthetic to steady himself. He looks happy too.

“Bet you didn’t think this was what you were going to be doing when you flew down here.”

“Definitely not,” Luca agrees.

“But it’s fun, right?”

“It’s phenomenal.”

At the middle of the tree, I stop and pull myself into a sitting position, my legs dangling over the gently flowing water. It’s clearer than I remember, the bottom a muddy brown. I don’t see any frogs or turtles, but I don’t rule out snakes. It takes Luca less than a minutes to get himself over to me and then we’re sitting side by side.

“Wish we had something to drink,” I say. “We could toast Benjam.”

Luca raises an invisible glass. “To Hannigan, the turtle shitter.”

I join him, my glass raised as well. “To Benjam.”

We’re quiet for a long time then, both lost in our thoughts of my brother. I remember when he took me down to Remington Park, right before he went into Basic Training. I couldn’t bet, of course, but we watched the races together.

He was always taking me places he shouldn’t have, and I loved him for it.

“You’re gonna miss me,” he accused, tearing his ticket when our chosen pony came in second to last. They were long odds for a reason, I guess. “It’s totally understandable. I’m pretty awesome.”

I was already missing him, and he hadn’t even left yet, because Benjam was—is—my hero. I remember looking up at him and being a smart-ass. “Yeah, right. No way am I going to miss you.”

Benjam just laughed. He knew.

I hope he knew.

Did he know I loved him?

When did I tell him last?

Not in any of my e-mails.

Not on the phone.

At Christmas? No, not then either.

“Hey, Ollie?”

Fuck. Tears. I turn my face away from Luca, embarrassed. I don't want to cry in front of my new friend. Not here on God's Bridge. Not now. Not like this.

Wordlessly, Luca reaches out and puts an arm around me, pulling me into a warm side hug. It does me in. I begin to cry.

Oh, Benjam... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have said it.

I was so fucking stupid.

I should have said it.

Luca's hug keeps me from falling off the bridge straight into the water. I want to fall. I want to fall and cry and drown.

“I loved him so much,” I whisper.

“Of course you did.”

“I can't remember when I told him last. I can't remember ever telling him. I can't remember...”

The panic is taking over me. It's the same sort of swelling panic I feel when they set off the tornado sirens or I see a Ryder van. I can't see that stupid yellow van and not go straight back to 1995.

“What were you doing in ninety-five?” I ask Luca quietly, sniffing back my tears. I stare hard at my knees, trying to get my panic under control.

“I was...” He thinks for a minute. “Sixteen. I would have been a junior in high school, I think?”

“You remember the Oklahoma City Bombing?”

“Sure, it was on the news all the time.” He considers this for a second. “Oh shit, you guys were *here*, weren't you?”

“Yep.”

I notice he hasn't let go of me, and I'm glad. With everyone in my house going crazy I've been needing a hug so bad for so long. I can't help but hope this one never, ever ends. I talk with him a little bit about what I remember from that day in April. I can remember what I was wearing, what I ate, how annoyed I was because they canceled a field trip we'd been about to go on.

“We didn’t know it was a bomb, at first. We thought it was a gas explosion. Still...” I trail off. “I was so pissed they canceled our field trip. What a fucked-up, selfish thing to think, right?”

Luca doesn’t say anything.

I watched a lot of news that year. We all did. We learned to be afraid of going into government buildings. I’m still afraid of it. We learned to fear terrorists in the heartland. We learned to be afraid of Ryder vans. We learned people die for no good reason.

“I think if Benjam ever had a second of doubt that he was going to protect his country when he got old enough, those sons of bitches clinched it.”

I push away the memories.

We’ve got to get back to the reception. Or head home. Or something.

We can’t stay on the bridge forever.

“I wish I could tell him how much I love him, Luca.”

“He knew. I promise. He knew.”

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## Chapter Seven

My answering machine has twenty-two messages. The indicator light seems to be blinking faster than normal. I wonder if there's even a point to listening to them. They're either all from Elizabeth "checking in on me" or from someone I don't know.

I had two calls from KWTW yesterday.

No, we don't want to be interviewed.

No, we *seriously* don't want to be interviewed.

Myspace is worse than my answering machine.

*New Messages! New Friend Requests! New Comments! New Blog Comments!*

I'm flooded with people's half-assed sympathies.

Even Kirsten posted a comment. Nothing in a private message of course. No, it was front and center for everyone to read how caring she is—and she didn't even spell my name right. I can't believe I was ever interested in her.

*My heart <3 goes out to you and your family, Olliver. Your brother was a \*brave\* \*wonderful\* \*man\* who gave his life for our country!!! I'm laying a rose on his grave in my heart.*

—<—@

I think it's the little rose emoticon that pisses me off most.

All these people who are commenting about how brave and good and wonderful Benjam was? Most of them don't even know him. I'm pretty sure none of them came to the funeral.

It makes me sick.

I turn off my computer and climb into bed.

\*\*\*\*

Elizabeth calls me at eight in the morning. I want to kill her. I want to get in my Lumina, turn up Disturbed as loud as I can, drive over to her house and *murder her*. Possibly with her phone cord. I don't know, I'll improvise.

"Do you know what fucking time it is?" There's no asking now, I'm *snarling*.

"Ollie?" Her voice is soft and sad. "Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay. It's ass o'clock in the morning. Why are you calling?"

"I dunno..." She hesitates for a moment. "You haven't returned any of my calls. Yesterday, at the funeral, you looked right through me. I've sent you like a million messages on Myspace. Are you... mad at me?"

"Am I..." I feel the idiocy of this conversation draining the oxygen out of the room. "Am I *mad* at you, Elizabeth?"

"Yeah. You know I worry... I just wanted to make sure—"

"You know, I thought I was just taking a little bit of space to deal with..." I can't even say Benjam's name. It won't come out. "*Things*. But no, you're right. It's probably about you, Elizabeth. Everything always is."

"Jesus, I'm sorry." She's still quiet, but her pitch rises. "I didn't mean to—look, I was just *checking on you*."

"Well, *stop*. You've been checking on me every hour since they pulled up in front of the house, and you know what? I'm pretty much over being checked up on."

"Ollie."

"Seriously, Elizabeth, don't call here again until I'm ready to deal with the sound of your obnoxious voice."

Sometime between that conversation and lunch, Elizabeth blocks me on Myspace.

Good-fucking-bye.

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"Ollie, honey, can you go get your father?"

"No."

Mom's putting together some sort of dinner at the counter. A casserole, if the dish is anything to go off of. She doesn't stop chopping onions for a second, or even look at me.

"Please? Be a good boy?"

"He won't come in," I say. "You know he won't."

Dad's stopped digging holes. Mostly because Mr. Paice came over, ripped the shovel out of his hands, and broke the handle in half over his knee. I

watched this happen from the back door but I didn't do anything to stop it. I guess I just wanted to see what would happen. Maybe I wanted to see a fight.

I wanted Mr. Paice to sock my dad right in the face, and I wanted Dad to hit him back.

I wanted blood.

When Mr. Paice threw down the two halves of the shovel and lunged at Dad, I leaned my head against the screen door and waited. Maybe he could beat my dad back to reality. And then my dad would come shake my mom back into it, too. And then they both could take this damn weight off my shoulders.

But Mr. Paice didn't hit Dad. He just threw his arms around his shoulders and hugged him. Tight. Even as Dad struggled to get away, to get to the shovel, to get back to whatever far-off land he'd left us all for, Mr. Paice kept hugging.

The hug went on forever.

I got super jealous then. Why hadn't anyone hugged me? I wanted to know. But that was before yesterday on God's Bridge with Luca's arm around my shoulders.

It felt good. Warm and safe and... Fuck, I'm digressing.

When Dad and Mr. Paice's hug was finally over, Dad collapsed on the ground, wailing. I had to bolt. I couldn't stand seeing him crying like that. Hated that Mr. Paice had pulled him out of his trance when I couldn't. I went to my room and tried to deafen myself with my music.

Since then, Dad's been lying in the hammock, which I guess is an improvement over tearing up the yard.

He still doesn't come inside much, though, and I don't feel like going out into the heat to try and coax him in.

"Ollie?" Mom asks. "What's wrong?"

She's so Mrs. Brady right now it's freaky. *Oh, I know Benjam died, but honey, that was wrapped up on last week's thirty-minute episode.*

"I'm going to my room."

I check my mail. Lot of junk and a lot more crap from people I don't know.

There's some real gems now, like this one from an anonymous address:

*Your brother fucking deserved to die!! Fighting goddamn Dubya's war! Mindless little dolls playing at war. He got what he deserved. I hope he ate a landmine! I hope—*

I stare at the e-mail for a long time, shaking. I don't even realize I'm doing it until I go to click delete and my mouse jerks all over the screen.

There are a lot more letters like that. Anti-war, anti-Bush, anti-anti... None of them are particularly coherent, as if the author(s?) went in drunk and pissed and started slamming their fists on the keyboard.

Then there's the e-mail with a picture of a fish. Nothing else, just a fish. Don't really get that one. It would have made Benjam laugh though, so even if it's supposed to be an insult, I kinda like it.

I'm about to close out of Yahoo Mail when I get a new letter.

*From: "Santini, Luca" <lsantinirox@hotmail.com>*

*To: "Ollie Hannigan" <olliemyollie@yahoo.com>*

*Subject: Need to talk?*

*Date: Wed, Jun 1, 2003 5:51 pm*

*Thanks for showing me Hannigan's old haunts and for giving me your e-mail. I'm in town a few more days if you want to talk more or get together. Otherwise, when I get home, I'll send you some photos of Hannigan if you want them?*

I don't even hesitate. I'm too afraid he'll log off and won't check his mail again until tomorrow.

*From: "Ollie Hannigan" <olliemyollie@yahoo.com>*

*To: "Santini, Luca" <lsantinirox@hotmail.com>*

*Subject: re: Need to talk?*

*Date: Wed, Jun 18, 2003 5:53 pm*

*YES! Actually... are you busy right now? We can chat on AIM or I can give you my number?*

\*\*\*\*

I never really liked talking on the phone much, but after I became friends with Elizabeth, I was forced to get used to it real quick. There's something about talking to Luca that's very natural, though.

Like we've known each other forever.

When he asks me questions about myself, I don't ever feel like he's prying. Like when he wants to know if I have plans for the fall, he's not holding his

breath like Mom to see if I still want to enlist, and he's not like Dad, judging me for not having a job yet. Luca's just asking.

I want to know everything about Luca, too. Especially his time in the service. When did he know he wanted to enlist? Did he have his sights set on the Rangers, before *ya know*? When did he first shoot a rifle, and how did he get so damn good at it? Can he still shoot? Has he tried?

"I've been to the range," I tell him. "I mean, Benjam took me when he was home. If Mom knew, she'd freakin' freak, *ya know*? And honestly... I've got to get a whole lot better or Uncle Sam's gonna be like, 'Uh, yeah, sorry, no thanks.'"

Luca chuckles, and I like the sound of it. I like making him laugh. It's like when we're laughing together, we create our own little alternate universe where nothing's wrong. My 'rents are fine, Benjam's alive, and Luca Santini is just a new friend I've made.

"I sucked when I shot at my first target," Luca tells me.

"Yeah, I bet. Those marksmanship badges really spell out 'loser.'"

"I'm serious. Was crap the second, third, fourth, and fifth times, too."

"I don't believe a thing you're saying."

"All you need is practice, young Padawan."

"You know..." It's late—almost midnight now. We've been talking for six hours, practically non-stop except for a piss break each. "It's not the worst part—'cause that's Benjam just... being gone."

"Yeah."

"But... I'd planned to enlist before this happened."

"Are you afraid now?"

"Nah," I lie. "Nah, not that. But Mom... I mean how can I do that to Mom?"

"It's a tough choice," Luca agrees. "I think you have to consider what's best for you, your family, and your country—not necessarily in that order and not *not* necessarily in that order either. Joining up's very personal. My father didn't want it. Considers himself a pacifist and gave me a big ol' 'serves you right' when I came home with my arm half blown off."

"Jesus. That sucks."

"Yeah, it does. But your folks don't strike me as the type."

"My folks are zonked out of their heads right now. Mom's like fucking Betty Homemaker, la-di-da, all's right with the world, and Dad is sleeping outside in the hammock."

"Grief's a funny thing."

"Yeah, well. Maybe I want to grieve too," I say, a touch angrily.

"Do it."

"How the hell am I supposed to when they're hogging all the crazy? I've got to be the sane, sensible, considerate one? I should be sneaking into clubs with my friends, drinking too much, trying to get laid."

"Probably."

I sigh and pull up my covers, the phone pressed between my shoulder and my ear. "You gotta go yet, Luca?"

"Nope."

"You said you're gonna be in town a couple more days?"

"Yep. The guys are getting together for a drink. It'll be a long time before I see them again, I think."

"Is it okay if..." Jesus, Ollie, way to clam up. I want to ask if we can keep on talking and tell him how much talking to him tonight has meant to me. I really want to see him again before he leaves. "Don't take this queer or anything, but I really like talking to you, Luca."

He laughs—a big, surprised snort of a laugh.

"What?"

"Don't take this queer? Haven't heard that one before. All right, Ollie Hannigan, you showed me your awkward, I guess I can show you mine."

"What?" I ask again, totally confused.

"Let's see if you can figure this one out. When I was stationed in Afghanistan on my first tour, my cousin used to ship a whole bunch of girlie mags to me. I liked *Hustler* the best."

I listen to him, trying to figure out where he's going. Chandler had a *Hustler* once, and he let me see it—way hardcore compared to the *Playboys* Benjam left under his bed when he enlisted.

"I could stroke one out, and everyone thought I was looking at the tits," Luca continues.

I'm waiting for it to click, but I don't understand.

"But there's guy-on-girl action in there. Get it?"

"Uh..." God, it's like one of those riddles I was always so bad at. *What has eyes but can not see and ears but can not hear? Two corn cobs and a potato. Baddup-pssh!*

"Which means there's *guys* in there, Ollie. Am I making sense?"

Oh!

"You... uh... looked at the guys?"

"Guess I'm fucking up that whole Don't Ask Don't Tell thing, huh?" Luca laughs lightly. "And FYI, you *can* 'take that queer.'"

He's gay. My new friend is gay. I've never known anyone that was gay before. I mean, unless they were on the TV. Okay, I can do this. I can be cool. Somehow I keep from saying *I don't mind gay people*, score one for Oliver Hannigan! "Did Benjam know?"

"Benjam was the only one who knew." When he adds, "Until you." I feel my heart do a jerky little *bad-dup*.

My heart begins to pound hard and fast. "Were you and Benjam..." But Benjam is straight. Was straight. Is straight? God, I can't get the tense right. Benjam's dead, but he's still my brother—dying didn't change that. So dying wouldn't change him being straight, right? He's dead, he's my brother, he's straight... he's not breathing.

"Ollie, you okay, bud?"

Oh shit, I'm crying.

"I didn't mean to freak you out."

"You didn't," I mumble. I'm too confused by the past and present tense to try and explain it to him anyway. "So was my brother—"

"Way straight."

"Yeah, he always had the hottest girlfriends," I tell him. I'm relieved a little bit that Benjam wasn't hiding something like that from me. And... I don't know. I don't like the thought of my brother and Luca together at all. "I imagined he had a... a... hot Afghan girlfriend."

I can hear the smile in Luca's voice. "Wouldn't put it past him."

"So, what happens if the army finds out you're gay?"

"Well, obviously I haven't been walking around announcing it."

"Would you lose your benefits and stuff?"

"No," Luca assures me—but I don't know if he's being truthful. I know there's a board or something to review people's DD's and UD's and sometimes, *rarely*, upgrade them to General Discharges. But do they do the same thing in reverse? Would they take Luca's Honorable Discharge away from him?

"If they didn't catch you having sex, you should be okay." I'm trying to reassure myself that my new friend isn't about to be the target of a DADT witch hunt so I don't realize how bad that sounds. Or how much worse it's about to get. "How *did* you get laid anyway? I mean, before you came back?"

"Didn't."

"What?"

Luca's acting like it's all perfectly normal. Here I've been awkward as hell because I'm eighteen and still a virgin with no prospects in sight, and he's—

"How old are you, Luca?"

"Twenty-three."

—Twenty-three and it's like he's fine with not getting laid.

"The whole time you were serving? No one? Ever?"

"No one. Ever."

"But now that you're back? And you're a war hero and everything, surely—"

"Why are you so interested in my sex life, Ollie?"

I'm blushing like a little kid. I'm *not* interested in his sex life. I'm just... comparing it to my own. I look at my hands. Jesus, when did I start tearing my nails? Just like Mom.

"I'm a virgin."

"Yeah?"

"I know, it's fucking stupid," I grumble. "I almost got laid at prom, but the girl I was with was really drunk and I... Didn't wanna..." I shake away the memories of the group I was with laughing at me for "chickening out."

“So you’re a good guy,” Luca says.

“Not really. I *wanted* to have sex with her.”

“But you didn’t. That’s pretty much the definition of a good guy.”

“Yep, except now I’m eighteen and still a virgin.”

“And I’m twenty-three and I’m one, too.”

He’s not laughing, and he doesn’t seem ashamed.

“But, before your tour?”

“Wasn’t exactly ‘out’ back then. Not a lot of prospects in a small town like mine.”

“And now?”

“Took two months just for the amputation to heal. Then there was a brief stint in counseling, I did physical therapy, and group—learning to not ‘just use’ the prosthetic, but be goddamn amazing with it. I wanted to shoot again. Fell on some black times, too. PTSD. More counseling. I’ve been a bit out of commission for a while.”

“And that’s okay?”

“That’s okay, Ollie. I’m fine with it. Had to get right with me first.”

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## Chapter Eight

For the last two nights, Luca and I have been talking on the phone from six or seven p.m. until midnight or later. I feel like I'm going to run out of words, but I haven't yet, and Luca never does.

I haven't brought up the gay thing again because... well... I don't want him to think I'm not cool about it. I'm totally cool about it. It's just a little different.

Unexpected? Maybe that's the word I'm going for.

It's probably because I stumble around *acting* like Persona Virginata, and Luca is so cool, calm, and collected. It's like he could have anyone he wants but instead he's choosing to be discerning.

I will say it's a little odd that I've *thought* about what will happen when Luca chooses that person. I don't mean I've pictured him naked doing the whole gay bump 'n' grind thing... Well, Jesus, not until I said that!

It makes me wonder. Would he be the pitcher or the catcher?

Christ on crack.

Stop, Ollie.

We've become fast friends, is all. He's important to me. If Luca gets a boyfriend or partner or whatever you'd call him, then he's probably not going to be able to talk to me as much. And, right now... I still need him.

I have other friends, of course.

Chandler and Craig and I hung out yesterday and watched some shit movies and listened to some shit music, and it was great.

But when I need to *talk*, that's when it gets weird. Craig? I can see it on his face. He *wants* to say the right thing, he just doesn't know what that is. And Chandler's as silent as ever. He's great at listening—but sometimes I need a little more prompting. There's only so much I want to say over a couple of Arby's roast beef sandwiches and patient silence.

Frances wrote me a beautiful e-mail. It was incredibly long and I haven't figured out how to reply to it. Every time I sit down to type, I end up writing something idiotic like, *Hey Frances! How's tricks? Thanks for the letter about Benjam.* I always sound... chipper?

Then there's Elizabeth. She'd listen and ask and talk and all of it, but... I'm still blocked. Jesus, I mouth off *one* time and that's it? A whole year's friendship down the drain. Well, screw her.

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Luca is going home day after tomorrow. "Home" being Oster Creek, Missouri. Not too far from Branson, actually.

Road trip anyone?

My original plans to go to New Orleans seem like a million years ago now.

I really don't want Luca to leave. I mean, we can still do the phone thing occasionally. But there's long distance charges, and he'll have to work, and I'll have to get on with life.

But maybe I'm not ready to get on with life yet.

I ask him if he can stay a little longer, and he hesitates, like he might seriously consider it. When he replies, he sounds sad.

"I wish I could, Ollie. Running out of money. And I have things I have to take care of back home."

I swallow hard and tell myself to stop acting like a fucking baby. "Well, let's go see a movie, y'know, before you have to leave."

He asks if I've seen *The Matrix Reloaded*. "Nope." That's a lie. "But I want to." That definitely is *not* a lie.

\*\*\*\*

Tickets are getting redonk expensive. That's why I always liked going to the dollar theater with Frances. The floors were sticky and the popcorn was stale, but who could complain when it was only a buck?

Are the dollar movies even a dollar anymore? I dunno.

Luca and I each buy our own tickets, even though I would have bought his. I'm not exactly flush with cash, but I do have my graduation money left. I tell him I'll get the popcorn and the Twizzlers, and he says he'll buy drinks for us both.

*The Matrix Reloaded* was shit the first time, but I'm strangely excited about seeing it again.

The lights go down and the previews start.

I love previews. Actually, so do all my friends. I can't think of a single person I've known who said, "Eh, who cares? It's just the previews." Except maybe Benjam. He was always late wherever he went, so if you wanted to go to the movies with him, you had to tell him the film started fifteen minutes before it did—and he still missed most of the previews.

I lean over the armrest and begin to whisper this all to Luca, but a woman in the row in front of us turns around and shushes me.

I fall back against my seat and Luca smirks at me, wagging a finger. I stick my tongue out at him.

Fine, so maybe the movie theater wasn't the best place to get together and recount Benjam tales. We'll get some bad Chinese in the food court later and talk about it then. For now, I'll watch this crappy movie... and try not to notice when Luca's arm grazes mine as he's digging in his popcorn or opening his Twizzlers.

And I *definitely* won't notice that each time he does, I kinda want to lean into him for another of those hugs he gave me on the bridge.

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Tonight is a Sgt. Benjamin Hannigan Life Celebration party—or something like that? Someone I'm not sure Luca even knows is throwing it in honor of Benjam. I don't want to go—which *isn't* to say I don't want to hang out more with Luca. I don't want to get together with a bunch of strangers.

Our Casualty Assistance Officer is coming by tomorrow to talk more about Benjam's benefits and... I don't know, my head is full of crap tonight.

Luca promises we won't stay long. We just need to stop in and make an appearance. Toast Benjam. Then we can leave.

"I'll take you home or you can come back with me to the hotel, and we'll get pizza and have our own Hannigan celebration," he says.

I think I'm kind of addicted to talking with Luca. It's like when I was eight and I started collecting Marvel Masterpiece cards. I frigging loved those things. I'd get a foil-wrapped pack (or seven) from the comic book store—blow my whole allowance on them, just hoping for some missing piece of the collection.

That's what it feels like every time Luca and I talk. Like I'm getting a missing piece of the puzzle... the collection of events that made up my brother. I hate that someone knew him better than I did for those last years of his life, but at least I'm getting to hear about him.

The truth is, Luca hasn't told me anything earth shattering yet.

Benjam was funny. Benjam was brave. Benjam could be a stubborn asshole.

There's a video somewhere of the guys in his unit lip-syncing to "Shake Ya Tailfeather." It was Benjam's idea, and that doesn't surprise me one bit. I wish I could see it.

When Luca and I talk at night, I kinda drift into his voice and just stay there. But now, sitting next to him in the car and he's talking, I can't help but stare at his face. He's obviously still adhering to military dress standards even though he's been discharged. His dark-brown hair is cropped short, he's clean shaven (I wonder if that's hard to do one-handed), and because of it, it's easy to see his good features. I don't know how to describe it, what *makes* them good. They're strong features, I guess. Long straight nose, green-brown eyes, and full lips. I've been watching those lips form each word he's spoken for the last two minutes. I still can't lip-read.

He catches me staring at his mouth, which is really embarrassing, and I'm glad when we pull up in front of the house.

There are other guys from my brother's unit at the party, dressed in camo, plus one guy in the blue Class A uniform. He's there to get girls. I don't know how I can tell, I just can. They're already drinking. The girls are all way older than me. Someone hands me a red solo cup full of beer. Does he know who I am? He doesn't say anything to me.

Luca puts his prosthetic arm over my shoulders, crooking the elbow at my neck. It's lighter than I imagined it would be. I suddenly wonder if he can still feel his fingers even though they aren't there. That "phantom limb" whatever?

"Hey, guys," Luca loudly announces. "This is Ollie. Hannigan's kid brother. Treat 'im good, all right?"

People start to talk to me after that. I'm usually not bad at making conversation, but talking about Benjam with these guys isn't as easy as talking about Benjam with Luca. I drink my beer too fast, because I don't know what else to do with my hands. Someone gets me another one.

A girl asks to dance with me. I tell her I don't know how, but she drags me to an open space in the living room and presses up close to me. She's way shorter than I am, and a stick. Cute. Very perky boobs. She's sort of rubbing against me while we clumsily dance to Justin Timberlake's "Rock Your Body." I hate this song, but I don't tell her that.

“Benjam was amazing,” she says, looking up at me with a little pout. It’s like he dumped her, not like he’s died. “I liked him a lot. I wish he was here.”

“M-me too.”

So, I’m pretty sure mathematics can’t quantify the number of erections I’ve had in my lifetime. At home, at church, at school, in the pool... Almost all of them awkward and uncomfortable. But this one takes the cake for worst erection ever.

She’s got her hands in my back pockets, grinding against me, and I’m afraid if she doesn’t stop, I’m going to come in my pants.

Except I don’t want to. Come in my pants or inside her.

This is supposed to be a memorial for my brother.

It’s not the time to be getting shit-faced and hooking up with some random college girl.

She leans forward and whispers something in my ear, her tongue grazing the lobe. She’s invited me upstairs, I think, but I’m having a fucking hard time hearing her over all the white noise in my head. I don’t want to faint again, not after what happened at the funeral. But I can feel it coming on. Swelling, overtaking me.

She nips at my ear, and without warning I blow my whole load in my underwear, yelping, humiliated—wanting to run very far away. I take a step back from her and look down. A small wet spot is forming.

Her eyes immediately go down to the dying tent in my jeans, and she lifts her eyebrows. *Don’t laugh, don’t laugh...* I want to beg.

“S-sorry,” I mutter and hunch over, tugging my shirt down and pushing through the crowd, blindly searching for a bathroom.

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## Chapter Nine

There's a line for the toilet, but as soon as the couple emerges, giggling and holding on to each other, I shove past the person at the front and slide into the bathroom. I slam the door shut on her cries and try to block out all the names she's calling me.

The stain isn't huge, but it's definitely there.

I strip my pants off and then my boxers, cringing at the sticky mess.

"Ollie? You okay in there?"

It's Luca.

I don't have any pants on, I'm frantically trying to clean up jizz with the last little bit of toilet paper left on the roll, and Luca is standing on the other side of the door.

"M'fine," I call back, my voice higher than normal.

"Do you need anything?"

"No!"

"Are you sure? Because you seem—"

"Unless you can bring Benjam back from the dead, why don't you leave me the fuck alone, Luca?" I don't mean to say it. God, I don't mean to say it. I regret it *immediately*. More than dancing with the college girl and blowing my load in my pants, I regret snapping at Luca. It isn't his fault. None of this is his fault.

I was going to blow-dry my pants, but screw it. Screw this whole night. I pull my damp, sticky clothes back on, buttoning my fly as I throw open the door.

Luca is standing there, waiting.

He looks solemn and serious.

Behind him, the girl at the front of the line cries, "*Finally!*"

But instead of letting me leave, Luca pushes me back inside the bathroom and slams the door on the protesting girl.

"What happened?" he asks.

Humiliated and frustrated, I motion to my damp pants.

He glances down and then back up at me.

“Did you wash it out?”

“No,” I grumble. “I just want to get the hell out of here.”

“Take off your pants and go sit in the tub. You can rinse off if you want.”

Tears sting my eyes. “I couldn’t stop it, Luca. She was touching me. And she smelled like candy. And she asked if I wanted to go upstairs, and I just... I just...”

“Hey, man,” Luca says. “It’s all right. It’s happened to us all at some point or another.”

I strip off my jeans once again, tossing them to Luca, who is already running water in the sink. I hesitate at my boxers.

“Get in the tub and pull the curtain,” he says, as if he can read my mind.

“It’s not ’cause you’re gay.” So lame. “I just haven’t been naked like this with anyone before.”

“Didn’t think anything bad.”

The tub is gross. I notice that immediately when I start to step inside. The couple who was in here before did *not* clean up after themselves. Still standing on the fuzzy bathmat, I pull off my boxers and hand them back behind me.

Luca doesn’t say anything about my naked ass.

I wonder if he’s looking.

God, I’m such a prick.

“How much longer?” I ask.

I’m naked, embarrassed, hurting, and my brother’s best friend is washing the cum out of my pants for me. Because this is my goddamn life now that Benjam is dead. 2003 A.B. *After Benjam*.

“Going as fast as I can,” he promises, shutting off the water. “Pretty sure if we don’t move it, that girl on the other side of the door is going to break in with an ax.”

“He-e-e-ere’s Katie,” I offer lamely. “Or Lu or Jamie or Heather or whatever the hell her name is.”

I look over my shoulder at the sound of the hairdryer coming to life.

Luca is focused intently on drying out my pants, of course he's not looking at me. I relax a little bit. Even if he's a virgin, he's probably seen a thousand cocks before in *Hustler* or on the Internet. I'm just the kid brother, it's not like I'm going to turn him on. This is what I tell myself at least.

"Can we leave when you're done?" I ask, trying to lighten this awkward situation. But for who?

"Yes."

"Back to the hotel to talk about Benjam? Get that pizza?" More tales about my brother's exploits, just like those foil-wrapped card packs.

"No."

I frown, confused. "No? But—"

"Could you get in the shower and pull the curtain like I asked, Ollie? I'm trying really damn hard not to look at you, and you're not making it any easier."

"Someone's, er, *used* the shower," I say.

I look down at my exposed cock, grateful he can't see. There's a bit of toilet paper stuck to the head. I gently pull it off, and my cheeks start burning. Is he actually trying to keep his eyes off me?

"Do you *want* to look?" I'm flabbergasted.

He doesn't reply.

The sound of the hairdryer blocks out the entire world. No one can hear us on the other side. At least I tell myself this. There's no window. Only the locked door. Luca drying my clothes, me partly naked. I'm not *afraid* or anything.

If anything, my mind is doing that insane thing again. Running off on its own. I'm thinking about how this is so weird, the situation we're in now. And how if Luca is trying to keep his cool, does that mean... he's into me? I mean, I'm straight. I've always known two things: I wanted to go into the army like Benjam, and I wanted a hot girlfriend like Benjam.

But Luca's lips.

I couldn't stop *staring* at them earlier, and I wasn't even tipsy then. What the hell was that all about?

This man holds all that remains of Benjam. I tell myself that's why I want to be closer to him, obviously. There's no other reason. There can't be any other reason. I'm not gay—the girl I danced with, the one who made me cum in my pants, she proved that.

I turn on the shower, spraying out the gunk left behind by the last couple.

“How did you resist it when you were in the army?” I ask quietly, my voice sucked up in the noise of the hairdryer and the water.

“I'm not an animal,” Luca replies. “I don't want to hump everything I see. Working alongside men didn't make me any less capable of serving my country.”

“But you're having trouble not looking *at me*.” Jesus. Christ. In. Heaven. What am I doing? I haven't had *that* much beer. “Luca, do you want to kiss me?”

“Right now, I want to march out of here and leave you to dry your own damn pants.”

“But not ‘no’?”

He doesn't reply.

It's another few minutes, and then my boxer shorts come flying at my back, toasty from the hairdryer. I slip them on, grateful not to be exposed any longer. That doesn't mean my mind has stopped.

\*\*\*\*

I beg him to take me back to the hotel. I apologize for making things weird. I promise I won't be a dork about it again. But as Luca pulls up in front of my house, he says, “You can't promise that, Ollie, 'cause I can't promise that.”

My heart leaps.

He wants to kiss me.

And fuck if I don't wonder about kissing him.

I don't get out of the car.

I can't get anything straight.

Luca looks at me, and I wonder if he sees Benjam when he's looking at my face. Benjam's lopsided smile and his charmingly over-large features. Big ears, big nose. That's my face too.

Would kissing me be like kissing Benjam? Like kissing a dead man?

I swallow. We haven't broken eye contact. Luca hasn't kicked me out of his car.

I reach out to him, prepared to have my hand slapped away. I touch his face. He makes a noise—half pained, half pleased.

I'm *tempting* him. I've never tempted anyone in my whole life.

"Fuck, get over here," he finally growls, and I lean over the center console. But when I'm so close I could say the word "kiss" and my lips would touch his, I stop.

"You're having second thoughts?" His voice is throaty, and as I'd suspected, as he forms the words, his lips graze mine. It lights up my nerve endings, and I can feel those brief moments of contact from the base of my spine to my scalp.

"Nope," I reply.

He whispers the kiss against my lips, torturing us both.

Gentle.

Healing.

Beautiful.

And promising so much more.

I don't even remember who breaks first, but somehow we manage to leave it at that single kiss. I stumble out of the car instead of grabbing his face and leading us into an endless make out session. Self-restraint.

I'm floating.

I'm goddamn floating.

And I never want to come down again.

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## Chapter Ten

I dreamed about Benjam last night. He looked exactly like he did the last time I saw him alive—six months ago, at Christmas. He came bearing gifts from the Middle East. General Order One Alpha meant he couldn't bring anything *really* cool. (Not that I'd know what to do with a canister of mustard gas or Middle Eastern antiquities.) But still, some casings would have been awesome...

Couldn't complain too much. Apparently some of the more "common" stuff is okay as long as it passes the reviewing officer. Benjam brought me a set of knives, a couple of patches, and a training manual. Neither of us could read it because it's in Arabic or something, so I still don't know if it's from Al-Qaida or the Taliban or neither or what.

Dad got a canteen he still treasures. I think if he could get away with carrying it with him to work, he probably would. Maybe now that Benjam's gone... Well, maybe he will.

And Mom's got her prayer rug. He didn't steal it from a mosque or anything. He bought it, proper-like. He even gave her the receipt to go with it and made a joke about "gift return" if she wanted to. We all laughed.

It wasn't Christmas in my dream though. And I wasn't eighteen. I was this little kid who had to crane his neck to see my big brother's face. Benjam picked me up, put me on his knee, and said, "Now, Ollie, you know you've got to carry on the proud Hannigan tradition."

"Of enlisting?" I asked him with little kid hope in my voice.

He grinned at me. "Eating crow."

I wake up thinking about that. *Eating crow.*

"What the hell does that mean, Benjam?" I mutter. Does it mean anything at all?

It's really early. The light outside is a dingy white. I've got a boner, which is nothing new, but I'm thinking this might be a Luca boner. It took me a really long time to get to sleep last night. I kept thinking about that kiss and what it might mean and how I wanted to do it again and...

For the first time since we fought, I'm getting a little nervous about Elizabeth and this whole blocking me thing. I mean, I still have her number,

and I can call her. It hasn't been *that* long. But I'd rather break the ice online. I guess I can try e-mail. Don't know if she's blocked me there too or not, but it's worth a shot.

*From: "Ollie Hannigan" <olliemyollie@yahoo.com>*

*To: "E. Johnston" <Joebaby97@yahoo.com>*

*Subject: Wanna talk?*

*Date: Sat, Jun 21, 2003 7:07 am*

*Hey Elizabeth,*

*Wanted to say sorry about what I said. Wish we could talk.  
Unblock me?*

*—Ollie*

By noon, it's obvious the girl who checks her e-mail obsessively isn't going to be responding to me any time soon.

\*\*\*\*\*

I'm surprised (and relieved) because when I walk into the kitchen, Dad's sitting at the table and it looks like he's had a shower. His face is red and there are blisters on his hands and forearms. Too long in the sun. But his hair is clean and his clothes are clean.

"Hey, Dad," I say cautiously.

He looks up at me without that weird sluggish delay that has become the norm for him lately. He gives me a small smile. He looks like he's carrying the weight of the universe on his shoulders. Or maybe just the loss of his son.

"Ollie..."

I sit down next to him, hopeful that we're going to talk. I've never been big on *talking things out* but with Mom and Dad both acting like crazy people, I'm kinda craving normalcy. And normal families talk about shit.

"I love you. I hope you know that."

Fuck. I don't expect those words to hit me like they do. I guess there's part of me that wondered if I was ever going to hear them again. Maybe that's why I say the stupid thing I do.

"Really?"

"Of course really."

“Even though...” *Benjam’s gone?* Didn’t we bury all the love we had in this family when we buried Benjam? Didn’t we toss it into his grave like white roses? How will we even do normal things together now? How do we breathe? Eat? Sleep? Eat crow? Love?

“I’m sorry I never said it enough.”

Who is Dad talking to? Me? Or Benjam?

“You’re fine,” I assure him awkwardly. I don’t like this conversation at all. “You... uh, fill in all the holes in the yard yet?”

Dad bows his head just slightly, like a child being chastised. “I don’t know that I can spend another minute outside. And the shovel’s gone.”

“I’ll ask Mr. Paice if I can borrow his. I’ll fill in the holes, Dad. Don’t worry. I’ve got it. I’ll fix everything.”

I stand up, grateful to have something to focus on until our CAO shows up.

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Mr. Paice is a nice enough guy. He’s a transplant from England, and he’s been our neighbor for as long as I’ve been alive. He greets me with a wry smile when he answers the door.

“Oliver? What’s happened now?”

He means with Dad, but the question jabs at me. For a second I take it as *who else is dead?* Am I always going to be this sensitive when people ask me benign questions?

“I just came to borrow your shovel, Mr. Paice. If I can.”

“Not for Frank, I hope.”

“No,” I assure him. “Dad’s in the house now. I think he’s... coming around. I’m just going to fill in some of the holes.”

For a moment Mr. Paice considers the situation. “Let’s you and I go to the landscaping store, then, shall we? I owe your family a shovel anyway and we can pick up some seed and sod, perhaps some flowers.”

“You don’t have to do that, Mr. Paice.”

“For Benjamin.”

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Mr. Paice has a very dry sense of humor, and sometimes I can't tell if he's joking or being serious. He tells me that he'd considered calling the loony bin on Dad after he saw him drinking out of the garden hose.

"I drink out of the hose," I reply awkwardly.

"Ah, but it's all in *how* it's done, isn't it?"

I don't get it and I don't ask. Was Dad standing on his head when he drank? I don't think I want to know.

The store isn't far from the house, but our drive is nonstop conversation with our neighbor talking about his life in England. He misses Marmite, real ale, and Radio Four, he tells me. I only know what one of those things is—or can guess at least.

"Real ale? We've got ale here in the States."

I think he laughs for a full minute. In fact, we're almost in the parking lot before he stops.

"No, you really haven't. But I've a great name for a real ale pub I hope to open here someday. Actu-Ale."

I groan at the pun.

I haven't been to the landscaping store in years. Its tall ceilings and warehouse-like structure make me feel small and a little bit lost. Luckily, Mr. Paice knows exactly where to go. We take a giant shopping cart down three different aisles, loading up with bags of soil, trays of flowers, and two brand new shovels. (One to "grow" on. Lord, more puns, Mr. Paice?)

Now we're off to see a guy about some sod—and that's exactly how my neighbor puts it. Apparently, (and I'm a newb about grass) you usually have to buy the stuff in pallets. Gigantic, hella expensive pallets. We're talking \$1,500 worth of grass and dirt. I eye Mr. Paice as he explains this. He *did* say he was paying, right? Because I've got twenty bucks on me and maybe forty-five in my bank account? My graduation money is in an envelope back in my bedroom.

But as we approach the sod station, it's quickly evident that Mr. Paice knows the man working the counter. They speak lowly, as if transacting some black market deal on the green stuff. I feel like I'm intruding, and step away, pretending to admire a display of watering cans.

Oh, this one's spout is in the shape of a sunflower. Fascinating stuff.

In less than five minutes, Mr. Paice is back.

“It’s taken care of,” he says, and you know? I don’t question him about it.

\*\*\*\*

I wave at Dad as we pull into the driveway. He’s watching through the kitchen window. I have to run into the house to open the garage because someone—let’s not lay blame—sort of lost the garage door opener, and we’ve never replaced it.

“I thought you were just off to borrow a shovel, Ollie?”

“I was,” I agree, as I walk through the kitchen to the door that leads into the garage. “But Mr. Paice wanted to replace ours and get some other stuff.”

Dad looks concerned, so I say the one thing I know he can’t argue with, the one thing I couldn’t argue with either. “For Benjam.”

Despite saying he didn’t think he could stand another minute in the sun, Dad helps gather some extra gardening supplies from the garage and carries them around to the gate.

I pretend I don’t hear him choke up when he thanks Mr. Paice for his kindness.

The three of us bust our asses in the yard—filling in holes, laying sod, planting flowers. It’s hard, hot, sweaty work that never seems to end. And of course the sod doesn’t perfectly match what we had in the yard before. But it starts to slowly shape up. There are scars in the yard, but at least the earth isn’t showing like an open wound.

If only it were so easy to heal my heart, right?

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## Chapter Eleven

I've just put on clean clothes after my shower when two short, sharp knocks sound on our front door. Just from the knocking I know who it is and am not surprised to see the immaculately dressed Sgt. Fuller on our front porch. She's our Casualty Assistance Officer and has been to the house several times already.

I don't really like her, but I can't decide if it's because she wouldn't be here if Benjam weren't dead, or if it's the cold, business-like attitude she has all the time.

*She* maintains a soldierly appearance at all times, unlike the NCO who first delivered the news. But sometimes, for Mom's sake, I wish the sergeant was a bit more like him. He was bumbling, but he didn't bury his heart under so much... paperwork.

I guess we should be grateful. Sgt. Fuller is the one who handled all the little details for the funeral. I wonder how many boys she's had to bury for the United States Army? It seems to come so easy for her. It's not a job I'd ever want to get good at.

Today Sgt. Fuller and Mom and Dad are meeting to discuss beneficiary stuff. Turns out Benjam was sending home money. Like, quite a bit. That's not something my parents ever told me. I mean, I know Mom can't work because she gets migraines, but I just figured Dad's job covered us.

I listen for a while as this brusque officer explains exactly what she needs from my parents. Apparently we are right on the cusp of qualifying for Parents' Dependency and Indemnity Compensation and something about Dad's knee replacement last year and all those bills pushes us over. It's insurance stuff.

I listen to them talk with each other. Mom is so pleasant to Sgt. Fuller it turns my stomach. She smiles a lot and offers refreshments, and I wonder, are you ever going to break, Mom? Or was that one display at the funeral all we're ever going to see of the real you again?

"Sergeant?" I break into their conversation.

She turns and looks at me. Her gray hair is pulled tightly back from her face, making her sharp cheekbones even sharper. I wish I could make her smile. I think if she smiled she'd look a thousand times less severe. Pretty even, maybe?

"I'm thinking about joining up."

Sgt. Fuller gives me one short nod. The good CAO's approval of my future plans. I see Mom out of the corner of my eye. She's tearing her nails again.

"If I die, will my folks get even more dependency money?"

My mother lets out a cry. At the same time, Sgt. Fuller says, "Only if you are supplementing their income."

Mom's eyes have gone huge. Gigantic marbles, shining, staring straight at me. Ah, so you *are* still in there. We look at each other for a very long time and then Mom's whole body begins to relax as if someone has just injected her with something *nice*.

"Forgive Ollie, Sergeant Fuller. He likes to joke."

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I check my folder of Benjam e-mails for the first time in forever, looking through the short letters my brother sent me over the years. I find one picture of him and Luca, and it makes me smile. *The Great Santini*.

"He's pretty awesome," I tell Benjam.

I haven't thought much about whether or not my brother can hear me. I mean, we do church sometimes. I know the *Lord's Prayer* and all that, and of course I sang in the choir, but it's been a while since we were *active*. And even longer since I knew what I believed.

*Jesus loves me, this I know...?* Is that right? But wouldn't Jesus have loved Benjam and kept shrapnel from taking out his stomach?

"Jesus, you got a fucking funny way of showing your love, man."

If there's a heaven, Benjam is *definitely* there. Probably standing guard at the gate, ready to shoot down demons or whatever. But that's only *if* heaven is real.

And even if we're not talking biblical, just metaphysical—I'm *scared* of ghost movies, but I don't know that I believe in ghosts. Besides, I don't want Benjam haunting this earth anyway. Not for me, at least.

I save the picture of my brother and Luca to my desktop and then delete a whole bunch of e-mails from people I don't know. I don't even read them anymore. I don't care if the names they call my brother are "hero" or "killer," I don't want to read it either way.

There's a loud thump against my wall and I startle, not because of the noise, but the direction it's coming from.

Benjam's room.

My mind immediately races back to my original headspace. Ghosts? But it's broad daylight, and I'm being idiotic. I hop out of my chair and walk next door. It's not ghosts at all. Something much, much worse.

Mom has three huge boxes on the floor, each marked in large letters—Keep, Sell, Donate—and there's a black garbage bag half-full nearby. I step closer, carefully peering over the side. I have a Brad Pitt, *What's in the box?* sort of moment where I am sure I'm going to find something so gruesome I puke.

But it's no one's head—just *things*. Trophies and papers and clothes and CDs and videos and *stuff*, all neatly packed up in a box meant to be given away.

“What the hell is this?” I snap, and Mom turns toward me. Her eyes are red-rimmed, which almost throws me off my warpath. *Almost*. I don't even care that I'm cursing at her. The mouth of the trash bag hangs open, and I can see the cigar box where our army men reside. I practically dive for it, fishing it out of the bag and opening the top. Sure enough, they're stacked to the brim.

I didn't know he'd kept these.

And she's just throwing them out like they're trash?

I glare up at my mother from the carpet. She smiles at me as if nothing is wrong. As. If. Nothing. Is. Wrong.

“What the hell is this?” I shout, rattling the box at her.

Her smile begins to falter just a little.

“Well, I'm just cleaning up, and—”

“He hasn't been dead a month and you're throwing everything away?” I have never in my life shouted at my mother like this before. The worst fight we ever had was when I wanted to go see The Wallflowers in concert with Nick and she said I was too young.

Mom drops her gaze. Her eyes grow dark, hooded by her heavy lids. I can see the purple veins. She looks terrible.

“Please stop yelling, Ollie.”

It's her barely controlled patient voice.

“You don’t have the *right* to throw him away!” I can’t manage even a single ounce of restraint. My vocal chords are tight. I hear Dad coming up the hallway. He’s going to break this up, but I don’t want someone stepping in between us. I want her to know exactly what she’s doing to me. “You don’t have a *right* to act like a zombie!” I’m crushing the box so hard the lid bends a little in my hands. “I’m still *fucking* here! Benjam wasn’t your only son!”

Dad whips around the corner, his face red. Mom is sliding down the wall, sobbing. I shakily get to my feet.

“You apologize to your mother right this instant, Oliver.”

“No.” I shake my head. I *won’t* apologize. I haven’t done anything wrong. Don’t they get it? Miss Tupperware sales lady, Miss Mary Kay, all smiles, all the time, your *fucking son* died. So cry and scream and get on with it and then come back to *me*.

Because I need you, Mom.

I need you.

The box still clutched tightly in my hands, I shove past Dad, into the hallway. I’m not staying here. I need someone who understands.

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## Chapter Twelve

Luca pulls back the door to his hotel room, and he can't hide his look of shock quick enough for me not to see. I've been crying the whole drive over. I almost hit a parked car because my vision was so janked up.

Luca holds out his good arm, and I gratefully step into it, letting the door close behind me.

His chest is so strong and so warm. I cry, then sob, then wail. Unable to hold myself up, Luca helps me over to the bed, and sits me down, never letting go of me.

He rubs circles on my back and talks quietly to me.

I don't know what he's saying but the sound of his voice is so good. I'm being a selfish idiot, but I can't stop. The dam is broken, and I'm flooded by the grief of it all.

"Sh-sh-shoulda been me," I manage to choke out stupidly. Benjam was the good one. Benjam was so smart. So fun. Everyone loved Benjam. He had so much more to offer the world than I do. I don't have anything to give anyone.

"Shh," Luca commands lightly. "You're saying stupid things. If your brother could hear you—"

"But he can't!"

I don't want to fight. Not after what happened with Mom. I don't want to fight. I don't want to think.

I wipe my face on my sleeve, and then, unabashedly, I place a wet kiss on Luca's neck. He doesn't pull away, but I feel him stiffen.

What am I doing?

*Testing him?*

I don't know. If you put a gun to my head I couldn't tell you.

"Kiss me," I beg. "Please, Luca. Please kiss me."

He studies me for a long time, his eyes roving my face. And then he leans forward. I can taste the salt from my tears. His lips on mine are gentle. But I don't want *gentle*. I press harder into him.

Of course this isn't my first kiss—even counting the one after the party. It's not even my first kiss with tongue. But as Luca grabs me tight, drawing my tongue into his mouth. I've never felt anything like it. I give everything with my lips.

My anger.

My sadness.

My pain.

I'll let him take it all, until there's only good left.

He puts his prosthetic arm against my lower back. It's cool and strong, and locks me tight to him.

We kiss and kiss and kiss and I'm oblivious to the fact that his free hand is moving lower until he pulls me up a little, feeling my ass through my jeans. He squeezes, and I like it.

"You're groping me," I accuse against his lips.

"I can stop."

"Don't," I beg.

He draws his fingers up under my shirt, gentle scratches that give me shivers.

I want him.

*I want him.*

I'm so glad I'm not standing because my equilibrium's gone bust.

"Ollie..." he groans, and I move, pushing him back against the bed. He lands with his arms out.

"Wanna try it out together?"

"You know I do." He's struggling, I can see it on his face. He hasn't stopped touching me, but he's trying. I know this torment. "Not when you need comfort."

"Right. *Comfort*. So comfort me, Luca."

I straddle him, leaning forward and kissing him. He makes a noise of pure frustration, and there's a wicked part of me that's happy I can affect him like I do. But he's getting control of himself, and he grabs my shoulders, pushing me up.

He's flushed, I can see it. He's horny, I can feel it. But his expression goes stern, and it kills me. It's agony and humiliation rolled into one, mourning and rejection.

"Do you see him when we kiss, Luca? Do you see Benjamin?"

Luca has such dark eyebrows. They're beautiful really, so brown they are almost black. They knit together in concern.

"Why would you think that?"

"Everyone says we look alike."

"Well, sure, I guess," Luca agrees. "The way brothers do. Not like you're twins though, and even if you were? You aren't Hannigan."

I'm *not* "Hannigan." Or rather, I'm the lesser of two Hannigans. I'm the younger one, the little brother. The passion and excitement have drained from me. I quietly climb off Luca and sit beside him. After a long moment, I offer him my hand. I'm afraid he won't take it, but he slips his fingers between mine.

It takes me a really long time to get control of myself, and even when I do, my voice quivers a little when I speak. "Benjam always loved the army."

I guess this could be a story about me too. We're so braided, Benjam and I.

"Me and Benjam used to play with our toy soldiers outside in a trench we dug in Mom's flower bed. He was ten, so he was the commander, and I was only five, so I was the grunts."

"Grunts?" Luca asks quietly. He's studying my face.

"Yep. Plural. And I loved it. I never questioned my 'commander' as he led my guys through the enemy's thorny rose brambles. We made each little green guy unquestioningly leap from heights that would have killed lesser men, we mucked through muddy terrain we made with the water hose, and when finally Mom found us—and she *always* found us—I filled up the holes while Benjam barked, 'Faster soldier!'"

"Sounds about right."

"Mom was going to throw out those toy soldiers but I saved them." I shudder to think about it, as if it was Benjam himself she was throwing out. "I would have done anything for him. He was a good brother."

My throat tightens. *Was*. Guess I finally got the tense right.

"I miss him." It's the first time I've said it out loud.

But it's not enough.

Those words pale to how I'm really feeling.

"Luca," I beg, and my heart breaks as I see tears shimmering in his eyes. "I miss him so much. I want him back."

"I know you do, kid. I do too."

I lie down beside him, putting my head against his shoulder.

"I'd do anything to get him back."

It hurts too much. I don't want to think about this. I don't want to talk about this. I thought I could do it, but I can't.

"Can I stay here tonight?"

Luca hesitates for a very long time. When he finally agrees, it's quiet and reserved.

"Can I sleep with you?"

"Sure," Luca says. "If we keep our clothes on. I don't know if I can... resist... otherwise."

"I want to do it with you, Luca." I know he's just going to shoot me down again, but I have to say it. I *have* to.

"I don't want to take advantage of the situation, Ollie."

"Who says I'm not taking advantage of you? Or we're not taking advantage of each other?"

I turn my head and look up at him. He's so close. I can... Yes, I reach up and pull his face in closer to mine. I press up into the kiss, and his lips move.

I don't tell him we could be each other's firsts or how much I want him to be mine. This whole thing is weird without getting romantic about it. I've never felt this way about a guy before. Last night I tortured myself trying to think if I've been hiding it or lying to myself.

The gay.

I tried to imagine kissing Chandler or Craig, but that just makes me awkward.

Once I start thinking about kissing Luca, though, I *really* start thinking about kissing Luca. I think about making out with him in the back of my

Lumina. I think about sucking on his neck. I think what it might be like to kiss other parts of his body, and I want him to kiss mine.

Whatever *this is*, I don't have a name for it. I don't know that I need one.

If he can just help me forget for ten minutes that I'm hurting so much...

God, his lips taste so good, and the way he's working the kiss, I'm getting harder and harder. It freaks me out a little. I don't want to blow my load like I did at the party. If I come, I want to...

"I..." I'm getting nervous. I pull back, and Luca's a gentleman about it.

"Get under the covers," he says gently. "We're not having sex right now."

Right now.

That means maybe later.

I do what he says. I like that he's taking charge when no one else in my life seems able to. I climb up under the covers, lay my head down on that overly fluffy hotel pillow. Luca dims the lights and gets into the bed with me, pulling me close up against him.

"I miss him, too, Ollie," Luca says quietly. He tells me stories about Benjam until I finally go to sleep.

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## Chapter Thirteen

Something startles me awake. A noise? A nightmare? Where am I? Oh. Luca's hotel room. It's pitch dark except for the glowing red numbers of the alarm clock. 3:11 a.m. Luca's breathing is steady, I think he's still asleep.

I try to shake away the adrenaline that came with bolting upright in bed, but my heart is pounding fast and furious. It takes a long time to even out my breath.

What was I dreaming about?

Benjam.

He was being killed over and over and over again by a life-size toy soldier. My toy soldier. And nothing I did would get the soldier to stand down.

"Ollie?"

Luca doesn't sound groggy at all.

"You awake?" I ask.

"Light sleeper."

Benjam talked about that too in his letters, how sleep had changed for him—how he was on alert, even when he was asleep.

I turn over in the bed, my hands searching for Luca. I find his face, feeling his cheeks, his nose, his lips with my fingertips. Then I lean over and kiss him in the dark.

"I don't want to go back to sleep."

"Okay."

"Yeah? I mean, you get what I'm saying?"

Luca gently takes one of my hands and guides it down his body. At some point last night he pulled off his shirt. I feel every hard muscle under my palm as he guides me. He's wearing boxers, but they are well-tented.

"Jesus, yes, I get what you're saying," Luca agrees.

I lean over and kiss him again.

This man has been my savior for a week now. How will I keep going without him?

Fuck. It doesn't matter. If we can just have this one time together.

Our tongues tangle, my body stiffens. I'm excited and nervous and honestly, I don't quite know what to do. Am I supposed to get on him? Does he get on me? All of this came so naturally earlier, before I started overthinking it. We should probably get out of our clothes first.

"Light off? Or on?"

There's something to be said for our first time being completely in the dark. Exploring by touch only. But I selfishly want to see him. I want to look into those hazel eyes. I want to watch his expressions. I want to see his body.

"On, I guess," I manage to pant before going in for another long, searching kiss.

There's some fumbling and awkward movement—because I don't want to let go of Luca long enough to let him find the lamp. But the light finally comes on; a soft orange glow that casts hazy shadows.

"Your hair's a mess," he teases.

"You're beautiful."

"Fuck." Luca groans deeply, drawing off my lips. It's like he's sucking the breath out of me. He pushes me back against the bed, and I let myself fall without resistance.

"We'll start slow maybe?" I'm pretending I know what in the hell I'm talking about. Don't need virgin nerves getting in the way of what's happening. "I can jack you off. You can do me."

Luca holds up his good hand. "I'm right-handed. Still not great with this left one. And I don't think you want me touching you with the prosthetic."

"Left'll be fine," I promise. It might be a good thing, him not being an expert with ol' lefty yet. Might keep me going longer. Probably not, but it's worth a shot.

I reach up, running my hands into the waistband of his boxers. Slowly I push them down, lower and lower until I can see that rough of dark hair. He's as hard as I am, and it's a miracle I haven't gotten a button in the eye.

The elastic drags over his cock until the shaft is totally revealed, and only the head remains hidden. He's bigger than I am. Longer and fuller. Seeing that makes me immediately embarrassed, and I want to focus on him and keep mine in my pants.

“You didn’t say you had a porn star cock,” I joke weakly.

I let go of my grip on his boxers, and they slide a bit back into place.

“Ollie?”

“S-sorry,” I stammer. “I... maybe we should... stop.”

Jesus, how many times am I going to chicken out?

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

He’s above me, holding himself up on the one, strong arm, his other arm free of its prosthetic so only the scarred nub, right below the shoulder, is showing. I reach up and do something far more intimate than putting my hands in his underwear. I let my fingers trace along the healed flesh. The mountains and divots, the uneven cuts, the angry colored tissue.

He looks at what’s left of the arm, raising it as best he can. I imagine he’s trying to see what I see.

“Is this freaking you out? I can put my shirt on and pin it or put on my prosthetic.”

My gaze flies back to his. “What? No! I...”

I cup the healed wound tightly.

“You’re not freaking me out, Luca. I...” I start laughing. God. I’m going to sound like a moron. “I’m nervous about you seeing my peep.”

“What? Why?”

“Not as big as yours.”

“So?”

“So, definitely not as big as a porn star’s. What if that’s what you’re expecting and—Whoa!”

In one smooth movement, he pushes himself up onto his knees and yanks my pants down one-handedly. It happens so quick I don’t even realize I’m exposed for a minute. But then he’s leaning down and placing a kiss—a *deep* kiss—on the head of my penis.

“It’s perfect,” Luca assures me.

“You’re just being nice, you don’t really—uhn!” It’s the second time he’s cut me off in under a minute. He’s not just kissing now. He’s licking. And

sucking. He's making a meal out of my cock, and all I can do is groan, delirious, and raise my hips, trying to get deeper into his mouth.

I wish I could say I last. I don't. I come *hard*, and Luca drinks me down, licking and sucking until my dick wilts. And when he is done, he asks, quite gentlemanly if he can penetrate me.

I don't know how to answer, so I just roll over and let him guide me up onto my knees.

"It's probably going to hurt," he warns. "But I'll be as gentle as I can."

I don't care if he's gentle or not. I just want to feel him inside me.

I *need* to feel him inside me.

He's placing kisses on my back, lower and lower, until he reaches my ass. I can feel him cupping my balls. Touching my sated cock. Teasing me. And then he kisses me somewhere I've *definitely* never been touched before.

That place between balls and asshole.

I whimper.

If I had blood flow to my brain, I might be able to manage questions... *Is this like you imagined?* Has he always wanted to kiss someone between their balls and their asshole? But all I can do is make half-coherent grunts and groans.

He tells me he's going to put his finger in there first. He's got hotel lotion to make it slicker. I think he should just go whole hog, that is until that first finger slides in, and I have to bite down on my pillow, not to cry out.

Jesus.

H.

Christ.

What is happening to my body?!

Luca assures me he can stop, but I tell him to shut up and keep going. No, I don't tell. *I beg*. I beg and push back against his finger until it's deep inside me. We keep playing until I'm ready for more.

"I'm glad I'm doing this with you," Luca grunts as he pushes the head of his cock inside my ass. The sheer *pain* of it is enough to knock me out. There's no replying that I'm glad it's with him too.

He takes his time, inching inside me, and there's this moment when, tears pricking my eyes, saliva trickling from the corner of my mouth, body opening to accept him, I realize Luca and I are one creature.

Just for this moment, we're one, beautiful creature.

And then he's pounding into me, and he only lasts about a minute more than I did before collapsing against me, spent.

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"Guess you gotta go back to Oster Creek in the morning, huh?"

"Yep."

I'm lying naked against Luca's side, and he's stroking my hair. When he speaks, his words rumble in his chest. It's a really cool sound and a really cool feeling.

"What's it like there?"

"Pretty. Lots of woods. Lots of churches too. Not much to do except sit on the porch and be peaceful or get on the river."

"I should drive up there sometime. Visit you. We could do more of *this* if I do."

"Well, I did enjoy *this*," Luca muses. He doesn't say it, but I can feel his hesitation.

"But?"

"I'm just imagining what would happen if Hannigan were here right now. I'm pretty sure he'd give me a two-minute head start and then come after me with his rifle."

"Benjam wouldn't do that."

"I don't know, he was always pretty damn protective of you."

"But why would he have wanted to protect me from *you*?"

Luca laughs. He's not taking my question seriously enough. "You're the kid brother. He'd say you're way too young for me, and even if you weren't, you just don't bang your best friend's siblings."

I grin at that. "If I recall, I ended up banging you just as much as you banged me, man."

And it was fucking amazing. Nothing I've *ever* done with my hand was as spectacular as being inside Luca.

"Not the point. Hannigan would say I'm supposed to be the responsible one here."

I've got an ass full of Luca juice, and he's full of me, too. No way am I going to play the virgin heroine run off by his "I'm not good for you" bullshit. I call him out on it.

"Well, Benjam isn't here. So how about you let me be responsible for myself?"

"All right there, killer. I'm not saying I'd agree with him. It's just what an older brother does. Hannigan always saw you as a kid. He didn't let himself see the man you've become."

"You like me, Luca?"

His fingers stop tracing patterns in my hair. "Didn't I just show you I like you?"

"Then don't be a dick about me coming to visit you."

"I didn't say you couldn't visit. Just meant maybe we should go kayaking rather than..." It's his turn to lose his words as I slip my hand under the covers and caress him. He groans, and the fact he is getting hard again tells me he likes what I'm doing. "Jesus you don't fight fair."

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## Chapter Fourteen

Luca lets me sleep in, which, lemme tell you, makes me like him even more. What happened between us last night is pretty much the exact opposite of “being a kid” like Mom wanted, but I’m taking my *not up before nine a.m.* thing pretty seriously. Plus when I do open my eyes, Luca’s sitting there with two-for-a-dollar apple pies from the McDonald’s across the street. They aren’t bad. Breakfast of champions.

I wish Luca wasn’t leaving until later, especially because since 9/11 happened, security at airports has become such a bitch. I can’t even go with him into the gate. I can still remember as a kid, waiting at those big picture windows for Dad when he would come home from a business trip. Benjam and I would watch his plane land with our noses pressed against the glass.

I’ve been thinking a lot about what Luca said last night after we did it. That Benjam didn’t get to see the man I’ve become. It kinda... sucks. Because I think Luca might be right. I mean, I turned eighteen last October—so Benjam technically knew me as a legal adult. But I don’t think he ever saw me as more than his kid brother. Eighteen is just a number if you don’t respect it, and I didn’t get a chance to earn that respect from Benjam.

“That’s a look,” Luca says as he scans my scrunched-up face. I pop the last bite of pie into my mouth.

“Thinking about Benjam.”

“I’ll be honest. Seen you think about Hannigan a lot, but I don’t know that I’ve ever seen *that* look before.”

“Eh. It’s something you said before. It’s bothering me. The ‘man I’ve become’ thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Benjam’s five years older than me, you know? I’ve spent my whole life in a state of perpetual hero worship, and now that he’s gone? It’s so much worse. I hate that I never had a chance to prove my worth to him.”

“Hey now, what’s this crap?” Luca asks. He pulls me close and kisses the apple pie crumbs off my face. “If you think you had no worth to him, then you’re nuts.”

It’s nice of him to say it, but I know better. “What did he call me?”

“What do you mean?”

“When he talked about me to you, what did he call me?”

Luca’s grin speaks volumes. He’s trying to disarm me, but I already know.

“‘Baby Boy’?”

“You know it’s just shit brothers say though. He thought the world of you, Ollie.”

“He called *you* the Great Santini.”

“Lotta guys in our unit called me that. It was a joke. Didn’t mean anything.”

“He said you worked magic, that’s how you got the name. Dead aim, keen wits, and a whole helluva lot of magic’s what made you the Great Santini. Got you guys out of firefights in Shkin and Khost without a single casualty.”

“And I got my arm blown off by an IED because I wasn’t paying enough attention. The magic’s gone, Ollie.”

My mind drifts to a bad place. The things I’d taken for granted that Benjam and I would do together someday. Serving together was only one thing off my bucket list. We were going to travel. We had plans to mountain climb. I was going to be his best man when some hottie finally wore him down. I never scribbled it on a piece of paper or anything, those words: *make brother respect me*, but it’s always been number one on that list.

And now I don’t have the chance.

Won’t *ever* have that chance.

A pain forms under my ribs, and I flop back against the mattress. Luca watches me.

Is everything going to hurt for the rest of my life? Even fucking breathing?

“I’ve gotta do something to make Benjam proud, Luca.”

He doesn’t reply—I guess he’s already said his piece on the matter.

I don’t know that there’s anything he *could* say that would make a difference right now anyway. I *have* to make the late Sgt. Benjamin Hannigan proud, and that means enlisting. There’s honestly no other way.

“Do you want me to come with you to the airport?” I ask.

“Gotta return the rental car, remember?” he says. “We’d have to take two cars or you’d have no way to get home. Lot of hassle.”

At my frown, Luca pulls me up off the mattress into a long, slow kiss. God I fucking love it. I never knew this was what I wanted and now that I've had it, why's it gotta be over so damn soon?

"Besides, I'd want to kiss you good-bye and if you enlist, you got DADT to worry about. Can't be walking around kissing nefarious looking dudes outside the airport."

"The nefariousest." I linger on our kiss knowing it's gotta keep me for a while and hoping it won't be our last ever. "You gonna call me sometime?" I try not to sound like I care *too* much, but of course I want the answer to be "yes."

Luca gives me a "you've got to be shittin' me" look, and his hazel eyes dance. I grin.

"You're already addicted to me," I tease him, privately relieved.

"Maybe," he agrees. "Got one more quick one in you?"

I'm already stripping off my pants before I even say "yes."

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I'm sure in the long history of music, there must be *some* song that truly celebrates the sheer joy of losing the V-Card. But the radio stations aren't playing it this morning. I've got "Headstrong" on one station and some Avril Lavigne crap on another. Whatever. Who needs a theme song? Ollie Hannigan, virgin no more! (Not exactly how I envisioned it all those times I had *Playboy* in one hand and my dick in the other, but brilliant nonetheless.)

It's still weird. All this with Luca. But after last night I don't really care. He made me feel good, and I'm pretty sure I made him feel good too.

Of course the sex is the only thing on my mind, and I've completely forgotten about the fight with Mom yesterday until... I get near enough to the house to see her.

Mom's sitting on the porch, but she shoots up the second she spots me. She's wearing her faded nightshirt—the Snoopy one that goes down to the knee—and the blue bathrobe. It looks like she had been sipping a coffee, but it's forgotten now.

Oh, God, something's wrong.

I haven't even turned the engine off before she's stalking across the yard, then running, her house shoes flapping, and for a moment I want to reverse right out of the drive because *shit* does she look angry.

That's when I realize it's not a general "something's wrong" it's an "Ollie m'boy, you're in *t-r-o-u-b-l-e*."

Mom smacks up against the car door, her hands on the window. Her mouth forms a tight line. Her eyes are bloodshot, and her skin is so pale it's almost translucent. I'm scared to get out of the car, and with her leaning against the door, I don't know if I can anyway.

Who is this demented woman possessing my mother's body?

I roll down the window just a little bit.

"Where *were* you!" she demands, and I flinch at the sharp hysteria in her voice. "Do you know what time it is?"

"I was at... a sleepover," I say quietly.

"Not Craig's! Or Chandler's! I called. I *called*, Ollie, and made them give me numbers for your other friends, too."

I cringe. How many acquaintances of mine did she call?

"I'm sorry, I was—"

"Get out of this car. Right now."

I roll up the window and turn off the engine, but she's yanking on the door handle before I even have a chance to flip the lock. For a moment I just watch her. Dark hair falls in her face as she stubbornly continues to yank on the door that won't give.

When I finally unlock the door, she stumbles back. I climb out, expecting her to launch at me. Instead, she just stares. Stares and stares and stares.

Does she know I had sex with Luca?

I blush and look down.

"I was... so... worried."

The desperation in her voice is fucking killing me. Ripping my stuffing out. I want to sink through the earth.

And then suddenly her arms are around me and she's squeezing me with incredible strength.

"Mom?"

She's shaking so hard, but making no sound.

"Mom, I'm okay, I promise."

“I didn’t know where you were,” she whispers. “Don’t you understand, Ollie? *I didn’t know where you were.*”

I don’t know how to reply. I don’t know how to reassure her that I’m fine, unharmed, *happy* even. Well, until this. So I hug her back and hope she gets some sense of it.

“You’re all I’ve got left, Ollie.”

“I know, Mom.”

“Don’t leave me. *Promise me* you won’t leave me.”

I swallow hard. “I... I promise.”

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## Chapter Fifteen

My family is... managing.

Mom's less of a Susie Psycho Homemaker, and when Dad's in the yard he's tending rather than destroying. Then there's me. I'm still figuring things out.

It's funny that this summer is the one that's flown by faster than any other. You'd think every moment would drag. I can still remember when I went from fifth grade to sixth grade and had to change schools. I was so nervous that summer, I wasted a lot of time worrying when normally I'd be playing video games or hanging out with Nick.

It didn't help that Benjam told me horror stories about what middle school was going to be like.

"You aren't going to have enough time to change classes," he said. "No matter what, there's always one class that's at the very front of the school and then the next one is way out in the portables. And the teachers don't give a shit about your excuses."

He told me I'd have to take P.E. and shower with all the guys, that Principal Harding probably already hated me since I was Benjam's brother, and I should start trying to bulk up because there'd be bullies. *Lots* of bullies.

How the hell was I supposed to focus on my *first ever* PlayStation when I had bullies and public showers and angry principals to worry about?

I was relieved *and* pissed off when middle school was nothing like Benjam warned. I made friends easily and I had a good time. None of my classes were in the portables, I took Band instead of P.E., and Principal Harding never even knew who I was. For a long time I thought Benjam was just being a dick telling me all those things, but now I wonder... Was that what school was like for him? Was he warning me because he didn't want me to suffer?

I close my eyes and try to visualize Benjam's face, what it looked like back then or when he was home over Christmas. Hell, even at the funeral. But it's getting the tiniest bit murky around the edges and that freaks me the fuck out. I remember his face better as separately defined features rather than one whole.

But I don't want to lose the whole.

There's a lot of things I don't want.

I bought my first cell phone two weeks ago. I can now call anyone I want in the nation after nine p.m. and it doesn't cost me anything. If I want to call during the day, I have 750 minutes of air time, which—why would I use it during the day when I've got my landline?

I should have bought a phone with a camera but I didn't think about it until I was talking to Luca, and he asked if I would send him a pic.

"Oh, you wanna see me?" I teased.

"You know I do."

Jesus, I could get off to the sound of his voice. I *have* gotten off to the sound of his voice. We did phone sex one night that went on for like an hour.

So getting him a picture? Not an issue.

I'm standing buck naked in front of my bathroom mirror with my digital camera, trying to take the pic where the flash doesn't completely cover my face. But when I turn off the flash, everything is grainy. It's lose-lose. How does everyone else do this?

Luca didn't specifically say to send a *naked* photo, but I assume that's what he means.

He's sent me a couple of pics of himself to my phone. It costs me a quarter a picture message, but it's worth it to see his smile. And his pecs. And that hairy edge-of-oblivion right before his cock pops out of his pants. Nothing as naked as what I'm doing, though.

I finally manage to get something passable by holding the camera above my head and tilting it slightly. There's the flash of light in the pic, but you get to see everything.

I get dressed and go to my room, quickly pulling the photo off my camera and putting together an e-mail.

*From: "Ollie Hannigan" <olliemyollie@yahoo.com>*

*To: "Santini, Luca" <lsantinirox@hotmail.com>*

*Subject: NSFW*

*Date: Tues, Aug 12, 2003 9:53 am*

*See the attached picture for a lil' morning stimulation.*

It's only after I've sent the e-mail that I realize I spelled 'attached' wrong. Oh well, if he notices, he won't be thinking about it for very long once he sees that picture of me. Maybe he'll send one in return.

*Naked on the bed...*

*Holding himself up with his prosthetic arm...*

*Wanking with his other hand...*

*Face screwed all to crap in pleasure...*

I'm still thinking about it when I drive to work.

Yep, I finally got that job Dad hinted at so very subtly.

Mom's really happy. She thinks the job means I won't enlist. But... I haven't quite decided about that, especially now that the whole 'earning Benjamin's respect' thing has become top priority. The more I think about it, the more certain I am. My brother *never* would have seen me as his equal if I didn't join up.

And God, I need to believe I can do *something* to make him proud.

Plus, there's the part of me that just wants to get onto the battlefield. Do some good. Defend the country. Hurt the people who hurt Benjamin. Make them bleed in the desert. Make them—

I realize quickly that my knuckles have turned white on the steering wheel, and I loosen my grip a little.

These mini-rages come on sometimes these days, but I'm trying to keep them under control. Luca doesn't like it when I get mad. He can handle the tears. He can handle the dark days. But he doesn't like the anger. He says anger's what blew his arm off.

That just makes me feel guilty and more angry. I've been known to slam the phone down on him, and he doesn't call back. But don't think about that, Ollie. Today's a good day. Remember your naked photo. Remember the potential of a return picture.

I've jerked off to the one where his cock is almost out so many times it's a surprise it still gets me as hot as it does. It's a tiny picture on my phone. Really pixelated. And you can't *actually* see the goods, but *God* when I open it up...

There, my mood's better, but now I'm horny. Great way to start a long day of shit shoveling.

I work at the Hearts & Paws Animal Rescue, and my job is cleaning out cages. It's part-time work and it smells like dog butts all day long, but it's okay. Plus it's funny how things work out. Grandma always used to say *even if your*

*job is hauling manure, be the best shit shoveler you can be.* Livin' the dream, Gram.

The other thing about H&PAR that's just a *little* awkward? Sometimes Michelle comes around to take pictures of the new dogs. Her photos are amazing, the friends she keeps, not so much. Michelle is Elizabeth's best friend, and seeing her hurts me every single time.

It's stupid that it hurts. I was the one who told Elizabeth to fuck off, but I didn't expect her to stay gone this long.

I... miss her obnoxious voice.

Sometimes when Michelle flounces in with her camera, I want to stop her and say, "Look, Blondie, I don't know if you know me, but we've got a mutual friend. How's she doing these days?"

But of course I don't.

That would mean being the bigger guy about all this. And last I checked, Elizabeth still hasn't replied to my letter and she still hasn't unblocked me.

I watch Michelle cross the room with a toy poodle on a leash. She's good with the dogs and the photos she takes really are great. I could probably open with that. *Hey, Michelle, I like your dog photography. How'd you learn to do that?* But I haven't even found my voice before the door slams closed behind her.

There goes another opportunity to talk.

I go back to spraying down the concrete where some poor mutt has decided to pee everywhere. Good use of your time, pal. Don't worry, I've got you covered.

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By the time I get home, I'm beat. It's only part-time work, but there's lots of kennels, lots of poop, lots of dogs that need walks. Plus, at straight-up five dollars and fifteen cents an hour, it's not exactly my ideal career.

Now Dad's pushing me to go to college. ("Just a semester of community college, Ollie, to try it out.") Mom's more chill. She doesn't care what I do—unless it comes to enlisting, of course. Then she definitely has an opinion. But that's the thing, for over a decade of my life, that's been *the plan*.

Maybe if I explain to her how important it is. For Benjam. In honor of his memory. To redeem myself as the do-nothing little brother.

I'm caught between *I have to join the army—for Benjam* and *I can't join the army—for Mom*.

But what about Ollie?

Does Ollie get a say at all?

What do you do when your responsibilities conflict?

I collapse into one of the kitchen chairs, admiring the squeak of the vinyl under my butt. Mom will make dinner soon, and I can stuff my face with some cheesy goodness and not think about anything for a while.

Or so I'd imagine.

While I'm sitting here, chin in my palms, Mom and Dad come into the kitchen together. Not one after another or one heading to the fridge, the other to the table. Nope, they walk through the open expanse together, their eyes—both very concerned—on my face. They move in sync and without a word, each take a seat at the table, one on either side of me.

“What's...” I was going to joke “*for dinner?*”, but the looks on their faces are so intense I say instead, “wrong?”

“Ollie,” Mom says quietly, reaching out and taking my hand. I immediately want to yank it back.

What's wrong?

Who's dead now?

Oh God, I thought about Grandma earlier. Is it Gram?

“Honey, we love you so much, you know that, right?”

I look to Dad.

What? What? *What?* What is going on? Why won't they just say it?

Friends, cousins, aunts and uncles, my grandparents... Is it Elizabeth? Did her body wash up on the shore of a lake somewhere? Fuck. Why did I think of that?

Dad looks uncomfortable. He's not meeting my eye anymore.

“*What?*” I finally manage. “What's going on?”

“Daddy—” Mom starts. I shake my head. No, no, no! Not Benjam *and* Dad. *No.*

I refuse.

I fucking refuse.

Tears are streaming down my face.

“Shh,” she says, squeezing my hand tighter. “Don’t cry, sweetheart. Don’t cry.”

“What’s going on? What’s wrong with Dad?”

“Nothing,” she assures me. “Nothing, he’s just the one who...”

“I didn’t mean to snoop, Ollie,” Dad says awkwardly. He’s still not looking at me. “I just wanted to get online and look up something about the hydrangea bushes.”

“I don’t understand.”

It’s true, I *don’t* understand. Isn’t someone dying? What the hell does that have to do with our hydrangea bushes?

“Honey,” Mom manages quietly. “You left your e-mail up.”

My eyes go wide. Horrified. Worse than horrified. I think they are going to pop out of my head and roll around on the table.

“You... you went through my e-mail?!”

“No,” Dad assures me. “But you left... er... the *one* open. The one to your... friend.”

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## Chapter Sixteen

I'm locked in the bathroom with my cell phone. My hands are shaking so hard I can barely dial the numbers. I have to backspace three times before I manage to get Luca's name to pop up on my screen. As I hold the phone to my ear, I listen to the ringing.

I hope he'll answer but he might be at work.

"Pick up, pick up," I beg.

God, I'm dying.

*"Pick up goddammit."*

"Well, hello to you, too," Luca says playfully. "Bad mood?"

"Luca!" I cry. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Calm down, Ollie." His voice is suddenly firm, authoritative, and very much on high alert. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

"I outed us."

The phone is dead silent for almost twenty seconds, and I'm positive he's hung up on me. I don't blame him. I ruined everything. Why did I send him that picture?

Why did I not shut down my e-mail afterward?

Why didn't I password protect the fucking computer?

"Are you safe?" he finally asks and his voice makes me jump. I really thought he was gone.

"Yeah. They're not mad they're just... surprised."

"Who?"

"My mom and dad. They saw the e-mail I sent you. The one with the picture."

"Oh God, Ollie."

"I know, I'm so sorry."

"I mean, how am I supposed to jerk off to it now knowing your folks have seen it?"

He's... teasing me? The tension and authority have drained from his voice, and he's calm again. I think I can even hear the grin in his voice.

"This is a huge deal, Luca!"

"Seen a lot worse deals than this. Don't know if you remember, but I lost an arm once."

"But!"

My exclamation hangs there for a second. *But what, Oliver?* I was so scared Luca was going to be angry. Scared he'd, well, not break up with me—we haven't said we're dating—but not want to talk to me again?

This whole time, I've felt like I'm chasing Luca, always chasing him. He says he likes me, sometimes unprompted even. And he calls me even when we don't have a time set. But we *aren't* dating.

And it bugs me.

I want to ask if he's seeing anyone else. I want to know it's all been worth it. My parents have seen my naked picture. (God, I'm the biggest moron for sending it.) They know about me and Luca, and even though they are weirdly supportive, I still want to know all this embarrassment is worth it.

"What's on your mind, kid?"

I bristle as the pet name brings up all those thoughts and feelings I've been having about earning Benjam's respect. *Kid*. That one word separates us. That one word plus a whole world of experiences. Is it impossible to fit in Luca's world without enlisting for military service? Is he like Benjam? Does he see me as the little brother, too?

"You know, you can drop the 'kid' shit, Luca. We're both adults."

I know I'm edging into dangerous territory again. Angry Ollie. The one Luca refuses to speak to. I take a deep breath and try to get myself under control while he stays silent, waiting for me to decide how my attitude's going to play out.

"You've seen combat, I haven't. I get that," I say as calmly as I can. "But it doesn't mean you have to keep knocking me down a peg."

"Whoa, Ollie, it isn't like that. Yeah, I've seen some shit but..." I hear him taking his own steadying breath. "Let me put it to you bluntly, I don't *ever* want you to have to see the things Hannigan and I saw."

“You don’t think I can handle it?”

“I don’t think you should *have* to handle it. I don’t think you should have to be forced to kill people.”

“I *want* to kill them.” I don’t mean for it to come out as a growl, but it does. “I want them dead. I want to wipe the whole country out.”

“You want Hannigan back.”

“*Benjam*. His name is *Benjam*.”

“I know, Ollie.”

“Why am I hiding here in the bathroom when I could be out launching my own RPGs? Huh? Answer me that?”

“Because you care about your mother.”

“I gave her eighteen years of my life, Luca. Don’t I get to have some of it for myself now? I want to do right by my brother.”

For a long time Luca is quiet and then he says something that makes my stomach clench. “Of course. But what you’re saying? This white-hot revenge bullshit? You enlisting because you want to cap some terrorist like you’re in a video game? *That* isn’t for Hannigan—for *Benjam*. It’s for you. It’s like you think blowing up the world is going to bring him home. But it *isn’t*. Nothing you do will bring Benjam home and nothing I do will bring my arm back.”

I hate Luca so much right now.

I hate the things he’s saying.

I hate the sound of his voice.

I hate knowing—in this awful part of myself that I don’t want to admit to—that he’s right.

The casing of my cell phone creaks under my hand.

“Do you want to know a secret?” Luca asks calmly. “I should probably wait to share it when you’re a bit calmer—but I’m afraid I’ve waited too long already and that’s why you’re raging in the bathroom instead of having phone sex with me right now.”

If I had any energy that wasn’t dedicated to seething rage, I might find that funny.

“Your brother didn’t want you to join the army.”

“Fuck off.”

"It's true," Luca says. His voice is calm and firm. "We had a thousand conversations, you know? And you came up once or twice."

"We were *always* going to be in the service together."

"I'm telling you what he told me, Ollie."

"I'm getting off the phone now."

"I wish you wouldn't."

"Well, I wish you wouldn't bullshit me. There's *no way* Benjam would have wanted me to give up on serving my country. *You* misunderstood him. You had to have."

Hanging up a cell phone doesn't have any of the satisfaction of slamming a receiver down. I'm a mess of nerves and anger.

Benjam wanted me to join.

I know he did.

I *know* he did.

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I've been ignoring Luca for three days, and it pisses me off how easily he seems to ignore me right back. Well, I'm not forgiving that bullshit he said about Benjam anytime soon.

Meanwhile, Mom is on cloud nine now that she knows I'm gay. I keep trying to tell her I don't know *what* I am, that Luca is the only guy I ever liked, and that it's really weird she's so happy about this. But her happiness has nothing to do with me finding someone I like or accepting myself. (Have I accepted myself? I don't know.) It's just now she's discovered a shield to protect her remaining baby.

His gayness.

She hasn't full-on said that if I go to the recruitment office she'll out me. I don't even know if she actually would. I'd like to believe my mom's not like that. But something hangs in her questions.

"Are you still thinking of enlisting, Ollie?" she asks.

"I don't know, Mom," I lie.

"But honey, if they found out you were gay..."

"They wouldn't let me in."

She frowns thoughtfully and falls silent until the next time we do this little dance.

Dad asks me again if I'll consider college, just for a little while. He promises to help with tuition and anything else I need to get enrolled. College wasn't ever part of the plan, at least not straight out of high school.

But it might be my answer. The balance between Benjam's ghost and Mom. If I do a semester, maybe she'll ease up—let me join up in peace. Then I can prove myself to my brother.

"I guess I could do a semester," I tell Dad at dinner. Mom looks relieved as if I've just promised her I will never, ever enlist.

We talk for a while about what I might study—but I don't know about any of that. Maybe I'll just take some classes that sound interesting. Why not? My three months of enforced freedom are up, and all I have on the horizon is Hearts & Paws, yard work, and Luca... who I'm not talking to.

Fuck.

So, I've got a decision to make: stubbornly stand my ground and possibly end up losing contact with Luca forever (like it seems I've done with Elizabeth), or give in and call. But I'm still pissed off. The worst part? It's *Luca* I wish I was talking to about what to do about Luca.

"I'm gonna call," I decide aloud.

"What honey?" Mom asks, and I realize, the dinner table isn't exactly the place to be talking to myself.

"Uh, just gonna call Luca."

Mom beams, and Dad gets that slightly awkward look he does every time I mention Luca. It isn't that he's *upset* about it. I think he just had expectations about me and my sexuality. I get it, Dad, I do. I had expectations too.

My whole life Benjam had his hot girlfriends. I mean, even when he was in middle school his girlfriends were pretty. I always figured that's what would happen for me. And now there's Luca and I'm not sure about anything except that I like him a lot.

"He's a nice young man," Mom says brightly. "I remember meeting him at the..." She pauses for a second, takes a deep breath, and says, "At the funeral. He was very respectful."

At nine o'clock I pull out my cell phone. Do I have to apologize? I know I hung up on him, but I'm not really sorry about it. Besides, he owes me an apology too for lying about Benjam's wishes. Can't we call it even and move on? Get back to whispering wicked things to each other late at night?

The phone rings five times before kicking to voice mail. *Hey, it's Luca Santini. Leave me a message and I'll ring you back.*

"Uh..." Great start. "It's Ollie. Hannigan. You knew that. Um... Can we talk? Call me back? Or e-mail or something. Okay... bye."

Amazing.

Best message ever.

Sighing, I get on the computer, trying to distract myself. I'm still following Frances's LiveJournal religiously. She writes about all her adventures with such romance. When I tell her she's sort of my hero for all she's done, though, she's humble.

*I don't know, Ollie, she says in one comment reply. I've never really consider my past accomplishments, I'm always looking onward to the next thing.* I genuinely believe her, and that's what makes it so incredible to me.

She's left Australia for Indonesia and sent me a postcard once she got there. It's friggin' gorgeous—a picture of a dancer with a wry smile and an elaborate headdress. On the back Frances practically wrote a novel about the first meal she ate in the country. Even the mundane is exciting with that girl.

It makes me want to do something.

Go somewhere.

And we never did get to take that road trip.

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## Chapter Seventeen

“Hey, can you help me?”

I look up from the dog bed I'm shaking out to see Michelle standing farther down the row of kennels. She has a hand on her hip and she's pointing at one of the kennels. I toss the bed back into the cage and walk over to where she's standing, in front of the kennel of a huge German Shepherd that's *enthusiastically* leaping against its kennel door.

“I'm pretty good wrangling them usually.” She beams a straight-toothed smile and tilts her head. “But I think this boy is taller than I am.”

“Uh, sure.”

I'm generally not supposed to take the dogs out unless someone asks me to walk them, but it's not lost on me that this might be the perfect opportunity to talk to Michelle about Elizabeth.

I grab one of the rope leashes and shoulder my way into the cage, almost getting knocked on my ass by the big friendly guy. He leaps up and puts his front paws on my shoulders, and it feels like he's *trying* to push me down on my butt.

“Come on, guy,” I say soothingly. “We're going to go for a walk and get our picture taken.”

In response, he gives me huge, slobbery dog kisses.

It takes a while for me to get him out of his kennel. I'm not great at handling him and usually Mrs. Sandison—the rescue director—is the one who handles the really troublesome dogs. Hearts & Paws is a no-kill rescue, and that means we've got some misfits. Somehow Mrs. Sandison always seems to be able to work with even the most rambunctious animals.

But I manage, and in less than ten minutes, me, Michelle, and the German Shepherd are walking together along the grassy field beside the rescue.

Michelle, it turns out, doesn't try to get the dog to sit still or pose for her. In fact, she tells me chattily, you get crap shots when you do that.

“It's all about moving with the animal,” she says.

“I like the pictures you've got up on the website.”

“Thanks!”

"Mrs. Sandison says she thinks you're a huge help in getting some of these guys adopted."

Michelle beams and flips back her long blonde hair.

I wish I could think of some way to bring up Elizabeth. If I could just touch on a subject that would make her naturally mention our mutual friend... But what am I supposed to say? *Hey, off-topic, but who is your best friend?*

Psycho stalker.

I guess I could just *ask*, but then she'd want to know why I was asking, and it'd be better if I didn't reveal myself as "that" Ollie. Knowing Elizabeth's penchant for talking, I've probably come up once or fifty times.

"Uh... so..." I say. Michelle squats down in front of the dog, which comes right up to her lens. I keep him from leaping on her. If he can knock me down, he'd send this petite girl flying. "You seem familiar."

The shutter clicks.

"Yep."

"Did we go to school together?"

"Nope," Michelle says.

"How do you know? I didn't tell you where I went."

"Didn't have to," she says, and looks up at me, her blue eyes flashing. She grins. "I know who you are."

"How?"

"Same way you know who I am. Myspace."

Heat rises in my face. All this time I thought I was so anonymous, but she always knew. "Then if you know me, you know what I want. How is she, Michelle?"

"Not getting involved," she replies, rising up and dusting off her jeans. "You want to know, ask Elizabeth yourself."

"You *know* I've contacted her."

"Yep."

"So she *is* getting her mail then?"

She gives me an annoyed look.

“We had *one* fight, Michelle. She walks away because of *one* fight?”

“You told her you didn’t want to hear from her.”

“I was angry. Don’t know if you got the memo, but my fucking brother just died. She was being a pain in the ass.”

“Look, I’ve got the pictures I need, so I’m done with this convo, okay?”

“Can you *at least* tell her I’m sorry?”

She looks at me like she feels sorry for me, and that just pisses me off.

“You know what? Forget it. I thought Elizabeth and I were friends. I was *obviously* mistaken. Tell her I’m done trying to win her back ’cause it’s obvious she’s done with me.”

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The phone rings just as I get to my room, and for a foolish second I think it might be Elizabeth. But it’s Luca, and I’m happier than I’ll admit that he’s the one on the other end of the line. He’s left me waiting more than a day—but at least he finally called. It means we’re not totally off, and fuck, I need us to not be off.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” I reply.

Silence. Well, this is off to an amazing start.

“Uh, listen...” I try to break through the silent wall.

Luca says nothing as I flounder to make words. *Asshole*. Calm yourself, Ollie. If you blow up again it’s going to be another half a week before you get a chance to talk. I’ve missed our late-night talks. I’ve missed being able to hear about his day and tell him about mine. He likes to hear about the dogs that get adopted. Mom told us she fell in love with Dad when her Pomeranian, Mixie, got out of the yard and Dad found the dog and returned it.

“Mixie hated everyone. She was a little demon,” Mom always said. “But by the time your father knocked on my apartment door, they were best friends. That’s how I knew he was the one. I love a man who loves dogs.”

Luca loves dogs.

“I’ve been thinking about taking a road trip with some friends of mine,” I finally say.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Maybe come up to Missouri? Do a float trip?”

“Sounds fun.”

All right, we're not exactly making wild, clamoring headway but he's gone from one word answers to two.

“I thought maybe, if you've got room for me and the guys, we could come stay with you for a little while? You and I could sneak off and get some?”

“I definitely would like a little more action than my left hand.”

I smile. “That a yes?”

“I've been missing you like fuck,” Luca says. “But...”

“But?”

“You and your friends are welcome to stay in the cabin, but I'm concerned. How're you feeling, Ollie? 'Cause I'm not backing down from what I said about Hannigan. I didn't lie to you and—”

“Let's—” I bristle. “Just drop it, okay? I don't wanna fight. I want to see you. I *need* to see you.”

“Then come see me, Ollie.”

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I call Craig first.

“How does hitting the road sound? Me and you? Chandler, too?” I'm positive I can convince Chandler to come, and maybe if I make it sound like a done deal, Craig will fall in line.

“Sounds fun,” he says, and I immediately predict the ‘but’ that's coming next. “But also sounds like I have no time, no money, and school is starting in a week and a half.”

“All we need is gas money,” I promise.

“Uh, you seen gas prices recently?” he jokes. “And you want us to sleep in the car in New Orleans? We'd need somewhere to stay.”

“That's actually sort of the thing. What if I told you I had a... friend in Missouri who has a cabin in the Ozarks?”

“Okay.”

“We could float on the river and grill and go hiking and everything. It would be amazing.”

Like the ‘but’ before it, I sense the ‘no’ that’s coming, so I go for the clincher.

“You’re one of my best friends, Craig. And we’re all about to start college. I know we say we’re going to stay in touch, but look at what happened with the rest of the guys we knew. How many people who left their numbers in your yearbook did you *honestly* call this summer?”

“None.”

“Right. Exactly.”

“We aren’t going to lose touch—it’ll be fine. Honest, Ollie. But I’m sorry, I’ve got to sit this one out.”

Well, Chandler won’t let me down. He’ll probably make me wait a couple of days before he decides, but he told us a million times how much he loves kayaking.

His mom answers and tells me he’s just gotten off work, but she doesn’t know when he’ll be home. She gives me his cell number. Damn, why didn’t he text this to me? I e-mailed him mine when I got the cell.

Chandler answers on the fifth ring, and I have to wonder if his thumb didn’t just accidentally hit accept. Am I even in his phone book?

“Hey,” I say. “What’re you doing?”

“Driving home.”

Chandler was always the smartest of all of us, but also the least talkative. I like him, he’s an interesting guy, if you can ever get more than six words out of him.

“Listen, Craig flaked out on me—” I guess technically that’s not true, since we didn’t have plans. “You’re gonna ride shotgun on this road trip I’m planning, right? Float trip in Oster Creek?”

“Oster Creek?”

“It’s in Missouri.”

“Ah.”

“So will you?”

“Nah.”

“Nah?”

What sort of answer is that? He didn't even *think* about it.

“I've got work. It's my last week.”

“Arby's?” Okay, so my tone's pretty shitty, but is he seriously suggesting he needs to stay out his tenure *at Arby's*. It's *fast food*. Who the hell cares?

“Yep.”

“We can do a short one. There and back, wouldn't need more than a couple of days.”

“Yeah, I'm thinking the girlfriend might have something to say about that.”

“You don't have a girlfriend,” I grunt, annoyed.

“Kinda.”

“New cell phone, new slut, you fucking don't telling me *anything*?”

“Ollie, I know things have been hard lately,” he says with a quiet sort of tension. “But I'd appreciate it if you didn't call Elizabeth a slut.”

“Eliz... a...” No. I'm not doing this.

I slowly hang up the phone, and then all at once chuck the whole thing across the room. It clatters against the wall, the ringer letting out a distressed noise.

Mom calls from the kitchen, “Ollie? Honey? Are you all right?”

My friends are assholes.

What made me think I wanted them to come with me anyway? It's not that long of a trip, and if they aren't there, Luca and I can screw as long and loud as we want. I'm an idiot for wanting them along in the first place.

Screw this. I'll make the trip on my own.

Dad knocks on my door and pops his head in. I'm sitting on my bed, hands clenched in front of me, seeing Chevelle type red.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” I grunt. Fine, fine, fine, fine, *fine*. Everything is fucking *fine*.

“You, uh, have a fight with your friend?”

“Craig and Chandler are assholes.”

“Oh, so not Luca?”

I look up at Dad. He looks... old. Did he always look old? I can't remember what his face looked like B.B. My brother's face is fading. So's Dad's and Mom's and maybe mine, too. When I look in the mirror now, I don't know who I'm looking at.

“Luca's fine. I'm gonna go visit him. Or I was. I dunno. I wanted to see if the guys wanted to do a road trip with me. But apparently jobs and girlfriends are more important than... Whatever.”

“You don't want to drive up on your own?”

“Not the point, Dad,” I mutter.

“Are you feeling abandoned?”

“Pretty much every second since Benjam died.”

Dad's face falls, and I realize how bad it sounds. “Nah, Dad. Not like that. You and Mom are cool.”

“No, I know your mother and I really fell apart there for a while.”

“Yeah. But you came back. That's all that matters.”

“I'll go with you.”

“What?”

“If you want to go on a road trip, and you don't mind traveling with your old man, I'll join you.”

“Uh...”

“Don't worry, I won't intrude on your vacation with Luca. We can drive up together, I'll drop you off, and then push on to Springfield to see your aunt.”

It never occurred to me that Dad would want to come. “Are you sure you want to drive up with me?”

“This guy means something special to you, right?”

I haven't said it out loud, that Luca *is* special to me. We still haven't even said we're dating, but I miss him when we aren't talking.

“Yeah, Dad, he does.”

“Then maybe we can all go to dinner together or something.” He scratches his ear awkwardly. “Unless you just want me to drop you off so you two can be alone to be intimate.”

I resist the urge to groan. After all, Dad was the one who saw the picture. He knows we're “intimate.”

“It's okay, I promise, we can resist... um... *that*... long enough to do dinner first.”

Dad smiles, and for the briefest second he doesn't look as old as he did before.

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## Chapter Eighteen

Driving up to Missouri with Dad is pretty much exactly like every other family road trip we've ever taken in my life. He does all the driving, letting me play with the radio. We stop periodically for sodas and corn nuts. It's chill.

I thought maybe he'd want to talk about Luca and this whole gay thing or about Benjam or Mom or something. But Dad and I don't do deep as we take I-44. It's just what I need. A drive without any pressure. Pleasant silences. Corn nuts.

The geography changes pretty obviously as we enter Missouri—large towns give way to farmland, and we see about half a million billboards for Fantastic Caverns. (They *really* want us to go to Fantastic Caverns.) And when we actually hit the Ozarks, wow. I mean, *wow*. I have to crane my neck to see the tops of the trees, and the roads curve wildly and dip so steep my stomach drops.

It's not that there aren't pretty parts of Oklahoma—I mean, we've got red dirt that stains the hell out of your clothes. But Oklahoma City? C'mon. Not exactly a mecca of beauty. These forests are gorgeous.

"Can I stay forever?" I mutter with my nose pressed against the window.

We follow Luca's directions to a restaurant about thirty minutes away from where MapQuest says Luca lives. I expect a hole-in-the-wall-type dive bar, especially after some of the gas stations we've passed. (Old-fashioned pumps *not* there for show? Check!) Instead, the restaurant is large and clean. There's lots of kitsch on the walls—like a Chili's, except in the middle of nowhere.

Luca stands up when he sees us, and my heart does a triple somersault. I'm keenly aware that we've moved even deeper into the Bible Belt, and Luca probably doesn't want me launching myself at him. Plus, Dad is standing next to me. So even though all I want to do is kiss him stupid, I wave casually.

"Hi." I smile at him as I sit down in the chair across from him. Dad sits next to me.

"Hi," he says, and then shakes hands with my father. "I'm not sure that we met when I was in town. I'm Luca Santini. Your son, Benjamin, was one of the best friends I ever had. He was a good soldier and a good man."

I haven't seen my dad get really proud before, but as Luca says this, he seems to straighten for just a second.

“You served together, didn’t you?”

I pretend to read the menu, letting them talk about Benjam for a while. It helps keep me from wanting to kiss Luca’s face off.

“Yessir, before I was discharged.”

Without a hint of embarrassment, Luca holds up his metal arm.

“And now you and Ollie...”

I glance around the restaurant to see if anyone heard, but I’m the only one. Luca doesn’t even flinch. He nods and says, “Yessir—we met at the funeral. Some people might find that morbid, but I think it was just Benjam being Benjam, bringing people together.”

Wow. I haven’t ever heard him say that before. Is this how he really feels about it? I warm thinking about it that way.

Dad nods, and the waitress comes to take our order. It’s a good thing that every restaurant on the planet seems to have buffalo wings, because that’s what comes out of my mouth for a starter and the waitress nods. Dad passes, but Luca orders loaded nachos to share.

“What do you do for a living, Luca?” Dad asks when the waitress has gone.

“For the moment, I’m running my father’s bait and tackle shop while he’s taking care of my grandmother in Arkansas,” he replies. “Dad started the shop before I was born, and it kept us fed through the divorce. I’d like to grow it.”

Dad asks him questions I never thought to ask. *Has Luca researched his financing options? What’s his marketing plan? Has he considered Internet marketing as well as traditional avenues? Has he done a market analysis, and what’s the competition like?* And Luca answers every question with ease.

“You know a lot about business, Mr. Hannigan.”

“I’d hope so, I’m a business consultant. You seem to have really done your homework too, and please, call me Frank.”

I try not to let my mouth *actually* fall open. Mom and Dad ground a certain sort of respect into my head growing up. You call your seniors “Mr.” and “Mrs.” *always*. When Nick’s mother wanted me to call her by her first name, I was so conflicted, I just stopped calling her anything at all.

To my friends—even Craig and Chandler who’ve known my parents the longest—Mom is Mrs. Hannigan and Dad is Mr. Hannigan.

But we haven't even finished our appetizers, and Dad is inviting Luca to call him "Frank." I look at Dad, who gives me a warm, friendly smile.

"Thank you, sir. Er, Frank. When I do go back to school, I'd like to major in business. I do my own private studying, of course. Learning as much as I can."

"Want to turn your bait and tackle into a conglomerate?"

Dad isn't teasing him—he's keenly interested. So am I—I've never heard Luca talk about this stuff before. I mean, I knew he was working the bait store while his father was out of the state, but my curiosity about it never went further than *How do you get the worms you sell? Do you go and dig 'em up?*

"Actually, what I'd really like to do is add on to the store, or rather, incorporate the store into a much bigger idea I have. Cabin rental, float trips, tours, fly fishing, a sort of Ozarks excursion for couples and families."

"Well, you've definitely got the natural beauty of the land going for you. Do you have property in mind?"

"I've been eyeing a place for a while. There's already one large cabin at the place I'm looking at, but it will need some fixing up. And of course I'd like to do private cabins as well."

"Will you contract out?"

I can't get a word in edgewise with these two—the way they're going back and forth.

I focus on my buffalo wings and just listen for a while. I wish I had everything so planned out. Six months ago, I would have given you the rundown of the plans I have for my military career. I can still do it, but the passion has sort of fizzled.

Without something to replace it, I feel lost.

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"I like him," Dad says, as we follow Luca's pickup through town and back into the woods. I'm counting the churches we pass—I've seen five to the one gas station. They're beautiful country churches, white-painted with simple steeples or bell towers. I don't know what the congregations would be like—if they would chase Luca and I out the front doors with pitchforks and torches, or welcome us to a potluck dinner. I guess I like to pretend it's the latter.

Simple country church with a simple congregation.

"I like him too," I finally reply. "A whole lot. He's... helped."

"About your brother?"

"Yeah." I swallow hard, making sure my voice won't crack if I speak. "Sometimes, Dad, I dunno if I can... I mean... I think about Benjam and it's just..." Nope, my voice doesn't crack, but fuck if I can make a full sentence. "I miss him so much."

"I do too, son."

"You ever get, y'know, angry at him for dying?"

It's a stupid thing to ask. It wasn't Benjam's fault he died. It was the son of a bitch with the grenade launcher. But sometimes after that brief moment in the morning when I forget he's dead, it all comes rushing back, and it's so much worse. *That's* when I get pissed off. Sometimes at the terrorists, sometimes at Benjam, sometimes at no one and everyone all at once.

When Dad finally speaks, I realize I don't want to know his answer—but it's too late for that.

"Sometimes. Sometimes I'm angry at Benjam for leaving. Angry he hurt your mother and you. Angry he had to go and be a hero."

I wince at the truth in his words.

"So I guess you don't want me to enlist either?"

"I want you to follow your passion, son," Dad says. "But would I rather that passion not put you in the line of an enemy bullet? Of course. Still, I'm not going to tell you how to lead your life."

"Thanks, Dad."

Why am I not pleased with his answer?

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Luca's home is freaking amazing. Nothing like we have back in Oklahoma City. It's an honest-to-god cabin, perched on the edge of a gentle, tree-filled ravine. From the deck, you can see all the way down to the river. Nothing around except forest and wildlife.

"Are you sure you won't stay, Frank? I've got a guest room you and Ollie can share."

I resist the urge to shoot Luca a *no, no, no!* look. Dad already knows Luca and I are hooking up, so we don't have to pretend we're doing the whole "we're

waiting” thing. But from the look on Dad’s face, he seems to appreciate the offer.

I’m relieved when Dad declines, like we’d originally planned. “I was going to push on to Springfield and visit my sister for a few days. She couldn’t get down for Benjam’s funeral. It’ll be a good chance to catch up.”

*And give me and Luca some alone time.*

“All right.”

Luca is ramrod straight. His soldier pose. I wonder if they drilled that into him so hard he’ll never be able to loosen up again.

“But, sir? If you change your mind—”

“You boys don’t want an old man getting in the way of your fun.” Dad actually *winks*. It can’t get worse than that.

Oh.

But it can.

“You’ll be safe, though, right?”

“Dad,” I hiss. If the heat radiating from my cheeks is any indication, I’m the color of a lobster right now.

“I’m just saying, if you need a pharmacy run, I can—”

“We’ll be fine, Frank,” Luca says. “I won’t do anything to put Ollie in any danger.”

Dad would probably flip if he knew we’d barebacked it in the hotel. He’d always taught me and my brother to be smart and safe. Then it comes down to my first time, and condoms are the last thing on my mind.

Maybe Luca and I should talk about it.

I mean, the first time we did it, we were virgins. I haven’t been with anyone since, and I’m hoping he hasn’t either. Okay, so that’s me being subtle. I’m gonna be really fucking pissed off if he’s had sex with someone else since I saw him last.

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## Chapter Nineteen

The second Dad's taillights disappear up the road, Luca pulls me into a tight hug, and I wrap my arms around him, melting against him. I breathe in his scent. He smells like these woods and sweat. Does living here make him smell like this? I want to go exploring with him... later. Right now I just want to get inside and strip him naked.

The hug ends too soon, and I want to cling to him. We had to sit in that restaurant, looking at each other, but not touching.

"Finally alone," Luca murmurs, letting his eyes rove over my face. "I've missed you, Ollie."

I stretch up into a kiss.

"Let's go inside."

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"So where *do* you keep your magazines?" I ask as I walk around his spacious living room. The floor is made of heavy stone, and there's a fireplace with a large hearth. I don't know how I imagined he would have decorated his home? But the sparse decorations—some military, some not—suit him.

"In the gun cabinet with everything else," Luca replies. He's not joking, and I realize he's misunderstood me.

"You know... the... *Hustlers* you told me about when we first met, or have you moved on to something else now that you're back home?"

Luca raises a dark brow.

"What?"

"You think the stores in Oster Creek carry a lot of gay porn?"

"Thinking no."

"Or *any* porn?"

"You could order it online."

"Guess so."

I fidget. "Uh..."

"What's on your mind, Ollie?"

I look at him. Now that we're inside, he's stripped his shirt off and God, he's gorgeous. Well, he's gorgeous all the time, but without his shirt, you can see every line of his chiseled chest. The American flag tattoo over his heart stands out in stark relief to his olive skin. He's perfect.

Now or never.

"I guess I'm just wondering if you're seeing anyone else?"

"Are *you*?" Luca asks with a lazy sort of nonchalance.

"No."

"Good."

"Would you be upset if I was?" I ask.

"Yep."

"You didn't answer my question though. Are you seeing anyone?" I try to play it as cool and disaffected as Luca and fail badly.

He even laughs at me.

"You know I'm not. Or if you don't, you should."

"And you haven't?"

"C'mon, what gives, Ollie?"

I shrug. "Just Dad talking about being safe. We were sort of stupid, fucking like we did without condoms that first time."

A hint of color rises in Luca's cheeks. It's the first time I've seen him blush like that, and it's kind of cute.

"I guess," Luca agrees. "But I trust you."

"Well, I trust you too."

"*Obviously.*"

"I do. But it isn't like we've said, oh, hey, we're only seeing each other. I mean, I'm only seeing *you*."

"Well, if you want assurances, I'll give them to you." Luca begins to count them off on his fingers while walking toward me. "Only ever given and received blow jobs to-slash-from Ollie Hannigan, only ever given and received anal to-slash-from Ollie Hannigan, kissed before Ollie, but not since... And definitely those first times were forgettable after I tasted Ollie's lips. Want me to go on?"

“Well,” I practically purr. “Maybe just a little bit longer?”

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We do not go out on the river the next day. Hell, we barely remember to eat. Instead, we spend most of our time in bed or in the shower, cleaning up what we did in bed. Luca jokes that we've fucked each other on every surface in his cabin, and it may be true. I think my favorite was doing him up against the sink in the bathroom, and watching ourselves in the mirror. It was *insane*.

Every time I come with Luca, I feel myself falling deeper into this place I don't know if I'll be able to get out of. I want him. I need him. I crave him with everything in me.

And I'm starting to think he's just as intense about me.

“What if I just stay here with you?” I groan against his dick.

I'm in the middle of a marathon blow job. Whenever he gets close, I pull away, easily darting out of his reach until he's under control. When he comes, I want the explosion to blow him away.

I run my tongue around the head of his cock, darting in the opening, lapping and sucking and driving him wild.

Maybe I'm being arrogant, but I think I'm kinda good at this. Three months ago, I hadn't ever thought about putting my mouth on some other guy's dick and now, if giving head were an Olympic sport, I'm practicing like a Russian figure skater. As long as it's with Luca, of course. We're halfway to gold already.

I bob on Luca's cock, faster and faster, and I can feel his body stiffen—time to pull away again—but before I can, he grabs me and won't let me go. Luca blows his load in my mouth with a long, *very* satisfied grunt, and I drink down every last drop.

He's sated, *I* am not. I crawl up beside him, press against him so he can feel how much I want him. I whisper naughtiness in his ear that makes him smile. Then say, “So? Should I move to Oster Creek?”

He turns to me and steals a kiss that's way too chaste. I want to push my tongue in his mouth. I think the thought of tasting his own cum freaks him out, but I like frenching him after he's gone down on me. It's weird.

“Don't you have classes to take, baby?”

Oh *God*. That name sends a thrill of a shiver up my spine. *Baby*. He can call me that any damn time he wants.

“Yeah, but I can withdraw. Move up here. We can screw all the time.”

“Mmm.” Luca grins. “Screwing all the time does sound like fun. But...”

“Jesus, no more butts Luca.”

“*No* more butts?” he teases. But as quick as the glint enters his eye, it’s gone. “I kinda agree with your dad on this one. You should at least try out school. You know I want that for myself someday, too.”

I want to stay with him in this amazing little house in the woods. And not just for the sex. When I’m with Luca I feel like...

Like...

I’m protected, and I don’t have to make *that* decision immediately.

I can think on it.

Forever, if I want.

If I stay, I won’t be able to let Mom down, and I can’t let Benjam down either, because I won’t exist in the same realm as the two of them. I’m with Luca, and we’re somewhere else altogether.

Lightly, I trail my fingers down his hairy chest, across the expanse of his hard belly, and reach that glorious waist.

“I hate this long-distance thing.”

“Me too, baby.”

He’s already figured out that name is my weakness, and he’s using it against me. Wicked jackass. I press against him, my erection aching for attention. But instead of giving me relief, he slips his arm around me and pulls me closer. He draws my lips into a long, tortuous kiss. When we break I’m lost.

“Luca?”

“Hm?”

“How many times have you played the ‘When did you first know?’ game?”  
I ask.

“That I’m gay?”

“Yeah.”

"None."

"Not even with Benjam?"

"Hannigan never asked."

"I..." I'm more than surprised, I'm gobsmacked. "I'm really the first one who ever asked you how you knew you were gay?"

"Yep."

"Well, get to answering then."

His smile makes my heart flutter. If I didn't like him so much already, I'd have developed a crush right now. "When I was twelve, I was at a sleepover, and I saw a friend of mine getting changed, and I had a reaction." He says this in a matter-of-fact way. "I'd had crushes on actors and stuff before. And sometimes they were boys and sometimes they were girls. Like, when I was little, I thought Nicole Kidman was *the prettiest* girl I'd ever seen. Still do. But after that sleepover, I realized my crush on Nicole and my crush on, say, Brad Pitt are two *totally* different sorts of crushes."

"You like Brad Pitt?" I ask uncertainly.

"Who doesn't like Brad Pitt?"

Brad Pitt, I am not.

"Get that look off your face, Ollie. I'm not leaving you for Brad Pitt."

"Only 'cause you don't know him."

Luca's hand begins to massage my ass. "I don't do the 'Freebie Five.' You're mine, Oliver Hannigan, and I'm not looking for a replacement. From Hollywood or elsewhere."

"I like you possessive," I admit as I slide up his body, wanting to be even closer. "So keep me here. Tie me down, and don't let me leave. Keep me."

There's *no* buts now. I'm driving Luca nuts, I can see it in his eyes as I take control of my pleasure, rubbing myself up against him.

"Are you saying you'll get yourself into trouble if I don't keep you here?"

"Maybe." I'm a big ol' liar. I'm lost to Luca—I can't imagine wanting to be with anyone else, much less *actually* being with anyone else. "Who knows what'll happen."

He doesn't like that one bit—I see it immediately in his eyes, and glory in making him jealous as he rolls me onto my back, consuming my lips with his.

He's not worried about tasting cum now as his tongue pushes into my mouth, and I match him passion for passion, humping against him faster now—eager for relief.

He kisses my face and neck, and *ohmygod*, he bites my shoulder, and I buck in a crazy sort of pleasure.

“Finger me,” I beg Luca. “God, please, finger me.”

“Not until you promise I don't have anything to worry about with you, Ollie.”

His hand is creeping lower, but it stops before reaching that place I've come to love so fucking much.

“Nothing,” I promise. “I'm yours. I'm yours. I'm *yours*.”

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## Chapter Twenty

“Let’s go hiking,” Luca says this morning at the ass crack’s ass crack of dawn. I don’t think the sun has even *considered* getting out of bed yet. I definitely haven’t.

“Sdark,” I groan into my pillow, and roll toward him, trying to trap him and his crazy idea with my body. “Go back to sleep, you freak.”

Luca is *not* sleepy. He starts to run his fingers over my ticklish spots, sending me squirming and then laughing. It’s too early for a hike, and it’s way too early for tickles.

“I want to show you around,” he whispers, and his voice is throaty and excited.

“Can you show me around in like five hours?” I groan, already stretching.

“How in the hell do you expect to survive Basic if you can’t even get up for a hike?”

“Maybe give me some encouragement?” I tease and push my hips upward to show off my morning wood.

“You’re insatiable,” Luca teases, running kisses over my chest and stomach and downward. “But I’m making this quick, because we’re going for that hike.”

\*\*\*\*

Okay, so there is *some* morning light creeping up through the trees, but I’m pretty sure if I hadn’t made Captain Wilderness stop and give me head, we’d have been stumbling around in the dark. The trail is fairly narrow, but well worn, and as we walk, Luca tells me all about the wildlife that live in these woods.

“You sound like a tour guide,” I tease.

“I was a tour guide for a while.” The smile he tosses over his shoulder makes my insides screw up. Fucking hell, I’ve fallen deep for him. I don’t know, and it doesn’t matter. As long as I can be near him. “I worked for a while on a nature reserve. That was the job Dad actually *approved* of.”

Luca doesn’t talk too much about his father—nothing really beyond saying he wasn’t happy when Luca went into the army. And of course, that comment

about deserving to lose his arm. I wonder why he stays with the bait and tackle shop even though his dad was such an asshole to him.

“Does your dad... uh... does he *know*?”

“There’s no one around for miles, Ollie, you can say the word.”

“Well, does he know you’re gay?”

“I think he’s figured it out.”

“But you never told him?”

“No.”

“So he doesn’t know about us?”

“No.”

Not that I really want to meet his father anyway... especially when I don’t think we’d get along at all. I never considered that pacifists could be assholes. I’d always seen them as peace-loving hippie types, but I guess people are more complex than that.

“But I could introduce you sometime if you want.”

“You don’t have to.”

“You’re my boyfriend, right? At some point I’m going to have to.”

I stop and examine the bright red berries on a tree to my right, pretending they’re more interesting than they really are. *Boyfriend*. Yep, I like that *a lot*.

Luca’s arms slip around me. “Did I freak you out?”

God *no*.

“I’m just playing it cool,” I tell him, utterly blowing my cool. “I’m trying to affect a vibe of perfect peace when really I want to fist pump the air and shout *The Great Santini is my boyfriend!* You know, I’ve got an image to maintain.”

I pluck one of the berries off the tree and roll it between my forefinger and thumb.

“Don’t eat that unless you want to die,” Luca murmurs hotly in my ear. Suddenly he’s nibbling my lobe, and I wonder if we can just lie down and do it in the dirt. I like him so goddamn much.

We go down to the bait and tackle shop after breakfast (which is still insanely early). Weird thing? The door is already unlocked. Luca doesn't seem concerned about this at all.

"Uh... Did someone break in?"

"Nah, I left it open. Couple of the guys come by for their bait every morning."

Sure enough, there's money in a small tub marked *Don't steal from the disabled vet.*

"It's a joke," Luca says. "It should say *you know I can whoop you all if you don't pay.* This way, if I'm not here to open up the shop... say because I've got my sexy boyfriend panting in my bed... the guys can get their own bait."

"What time would you have opened if we didn't—" I draw heavy air quotes with my fingers "—'sleep in'?"

"Four thirty."

"Jesus Christ with a crack pipe."

"Sometimes they're already lined up outside."

"You guys are crazy."

"Fishermen have their quirks."

"Hey, you know what I just thought?" I walk around, looking at the wall of rods and reels before hitting my favorite spot in the store: the lures. Even as a kid, I loved going into the lure aisle at Walmart, even though no one in my family really fished. I just liked to feel the rubbery, sparkly worms. I'm going to be nineteen soon and I'm still doing it.

"You smoosh it, you buy it," Luca calls, even though I've got my back to him. Touching the fake worms must be a pastime enjoyed by many. "And what did you just think?"

"You should sell liquor here, too."

"Nah, J.J.'s down the road sells booze to the guys."

"Yeah, but it would be one-stop shopping then. Bait and hooks and Budweiser."

I love Luca's laugh and I can't help but sneak a glance at him... even though I'm still squishing the fake worm in my hand.

“Eh, well, J.J. has been good to my family over the years. He stopped selling to my mom when, y’know, her drinking got to be more of a ‘good time’ than she could handle. And even if he was a bastard, we pretty much do non-compete in Oster Creek. Just how things are.”

That’s... kinda cool.

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Canoe, kayak, or inner tube? We don’t have enough people for a raft. So many ways to float on down the river. But I want to be lazy! So inner tube it is.

I grin at Luca as we throw our shirts and jeans in the back of his truck.

“You ever done this before?”

“A bajillion years ago. Went on a rafting trip and Benjam got peed on.”

“What?” Luca asks with a look on his face that falls somewhere between humor and horror.

“Some dudes were *super drunk* and pissed off a bridge just as our raft was coming under it. Benjam got peed on.”

Luca just shakes his head. “This is why I don’t drink often.”

“So you don’t pee on kids floating down the river?”

“Among other things. Saw a lot of guys in my unit get a little too dependent on booze. Got real tempted there myself for a while. It’s easy to forget you’ve only got one good arm when you’re black-out drunk.”

The inner tubes Luca has are large and yellow, with backs to them. Like a recliner for the river. He hands me an air pump and I start to inflate mine while he works on his.

“That’s not something I ever did before. Get drunk,” I admit. “I’ve always been the good kid.”

“Until you took up with an ‘older man’ and ran away from home?”

“Ex-x-x-actly,” I draw out.

It takes me a good four minutes to get the entire tube inflated, but once it is, I’m pretty sure a baby elephant could sit comfortably in it and float on down the river.

“So we just head out?”

“Yep,” Luca agrees. “But I’m going to rope them together. That way we don’t get separated.”

“What if...” I don’t mean to, but my eyes naturally trail down his bare torso. Fuck, he’s even sexier when he’s just a bit sweaty. “I mean, what if someone sees us?”

“You worry too much, Ollie,” he replies. “We’ll be two guys with our inner tubes tied together. It’s not like you’re going to go down on me as we hit the rapids.”

I waggle my eyebrows at him. “Well...”

Floating on the river in an inner tube with Luca near enough to touch? Just about the most damn fun I’ve had in my life. I keep having to smear on sunscreen (some of us not being *near* as golden tan as others...), and as for that blow job thing? It’s a lazy river, why wouldn’t we be able to fool around? Oh, maybe because of the fifty-seven other groups of people we pass on the way!

Kids and their parents, groups of teenagers, college kids, really drunk adults. It seems like every time we pass someone in our little tandem inner tubes, someone waves and hollers over to us. Even when we’ve already passed them once before, they wave and holler. So we do the same back.

We eat sandwiches Luca bought at the little cafe on the edge of town. After I accidentally drop half of mine in the water, I make puppy-dog eyes at my boyfriend (still haven’t gotten used to that!) to get him to share the rest of his—which he refuses.

I paddle us around and around with my feet so that we turn in a slow circle and get a three sixty view of the river. A fish nibbles my foot at one point, which feels totally insane. It’s like someone tickling your toes, except I’m almost convinced it might be some sort of Ozarks piranha, so I make it a point to put my water socks back on.

And after floating for several hours, my body finally remembers we got up at the ass crack’s ass crack, and I fall asleep. This means all the important “avoiding the branches sticking out of the water” work is left to Luca. I’m too unconscious to care.

When I finally open my eyes again, the sun is low in the sky, and we’ve bumped up against the shore.

“What the hell?” I murmur.

“You fell asleep.”

“For how long?”

“Long enough to get a little red.”

I look down at my arms. Shit. A little red is right.

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## Chapter Twenty-One

Dad's back way too soon—even though I'm pretty sure he took the long way from my aunt's in Springfield. He's a cool guy, my dad. I don't think I ever realized just how cool before, but he really is.

He shakes hands with Luca while I reluctantly load my suitcase into the car.

I don't want to go home yet. No, that isn't right. I don't want to go home *at all*.

I try desperately to think up an excuse to stay. We only got on the river the one time. There are so many more places to explore. I don't think I'm ready to face real life again. Not yet. Just give me another week.

What's back home for me, really? School I'm only vaguely interested in attending? Hearts & Paws? My jerk friends with their own lives? I look at Luca and then at his gorgeous cabin home. Dude, if I can clean up dog shit, I can work in a bait store, right? I can cook and I can clean. I'm not exactly a gourmet chef, but I can follow directions on boxes. Or there's always the Internet.

I walk up to Luca, and he gives me the biggest hug which *finally* doesn't irritate my sunburn. For the last couple of days even the slightest touch was murder. But even if it had been murder, I'd want him to hold me a minute longer. I whisper in his ear, "Do you want me to stay here with you?"

He pulls back and studies me, and I can see all the colors that meld to make the hazel of his eyes. They are so beautiful and honest. It's not only color I see in them, but truth. The seconds tick by, and I realize he's not going to reply.

I step back. I'm hurt. I shouldn't be—we're not exactly at the "moving in" stage of this weird relationship. But being with him feels so good.

Somehow, I think these woods could heal me.

Luca reaches for me, but I pretend I don't see and manage to casually sidestep him, as if I'm avoiding a divot in the rocky driveway. I make my way toward Dad.

I don't know where I fit in this world. Not with my family, not with Luca, not with myself.

"Ollie?" My heart seizes at the sound of Luca's voice. God, it's going to be so hard being apart from him. "You don't have to go," he says. There's a moment of silence followed by, "Please don't go."

I stop and look at Dad. He's raised an eyebrow, but not necessarily at Luca's offer. It's more of a, *Well, what are you going to do, Oliver?* look.

"Mom would kill me if I left," I tell my father.

"You won't be *that* far away."

I mirror Dad's raised eyebrow, and he laughs. "All right, you won't be around the corner, but, Ollie... if you want to—if you *need to*—then stay. Stay and figure things out."

"What about school?"

"I'm certain they have colleges in Missouri as well."

"But..."

"Son, do you want me to talk you into it? Or out of it? Or do you just want me to drag you into the car?"

I don't want to be talked into anything.

Or out of anything.

And I definitely don't want to be dragged into the car.

\*\*\*\*

Mom's not happy. Yes, I'm a coward. Yes, I let Dad make the call from Luca's house and do all the initial talking. When he finally hands the phone over, Mom lets me have it for almost a full five minutes. Is it fucked up that I'm actually happy she's yelling? It's so B.B. I just let her yell.

She finishes with, "And don't you think you guys are moving awful quick, Ollie?"

"It's not just about being with Luca, Mom," I say honestly. I play with my nails—never going to be able to break this habit. "I don't know what I *want* anymore. I know what I *have* to do. I *have* to enlist—"

She sucks air through her teeth.

"And I know what I *can't* do, which is enlist."

There's silence on the other end.

"But I don't know what I *want* to do... except make both you and Benjamin happy."

"Ollie..."

“So, I’m figuring it out.”

She wants me to come home—at least long enough to get some of my stuff. She says she can’t stomach the thought of me cycling through a weekend’s worth of underwear over and over again. I laugh and remind her I’ll have to get my car anyway, so yes, I can come home for the weekend.

“Good,” she says smugly, as if she’s just won a debate.

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I always knew I was going to move away at some point, but even with basic training, I figured I’d have my parents’ house to go back to for a while. Leaving for good seemed like some sort of distant thing.

I guess I don’t know that this is permanent, though Mom has loudly announced that she’s turning my room into the little office she’s always wanted. So in her mind at least, I’m not coming home.

I could always... sleep in Benjam’s room when I visit.

After dinner, I go up there. I haven’t been in his room since the day Mom and I had that blow-up fight about his stuff. I guess I didn’t really want to know if she’d thrown his things out or not.

I try not to make any noise as I open his door and slip inside. His lights flicker for a second before illuminating everything. I don’t know what I expect to see. The boxes still lined up in the floor? An empty room?

Instead, it’s the simple in between of a converted space. Those are my brother’s curtains, and his military photo hangs on the wall, along with the personal condolence letter President Bush sent to Mom and Dad. Some of his high school sports trophies line a shelf, along with his service medals. But other things are gone. The posters are gone, along with the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit calendar that had been hanging since he enlisted in 1998. Mom has changed the sheets and the comforter on his bed, and cleared off the top of the dresser except for...

My mouth goes dry, and I make a noise somewhere between a laugh and a cry. Mom must have gone into my room at some point and got out the cigar box. She doesn’t understand what she’s done or what it means to me. She doesn’t understand how she’s just broken my heart and mended it at the same time.

Mom has divided the soldiers into two groups, and made them face each other. A little green, plastic war. Behind them, stuck in the corner of the mirror

frame is a picture of Benjam and I, ten and five, standing in front of her rose bushes, the soldiers proudly in our hands. Benjam is trying his best to look serious, but I'm grinning like mad and leaning into him.

"He loved you so much." Mom's gentle voice startles me, and I don't have time to hide my tears from her.

Oh, fuck it. We're standing in my brother's room looking at the past... Hiding the sadness would be stupid. I go to my mother and give her the biggest hug. She kisses my cheek.

"I loved him too, Mom," I tell her. "It was so much easier when he was here. I knew exactly where I was going."

I wish Benjam were still alive. He'd help me figure this all out. He'd probably give me grief for being such a girl about everything—but ultimately he'd help me out.

*What do you want to do, Ollie?*

I dunno, Benjam. I used to want to be a Ranger.

*Not good enough, soldier. I'm not interested in what you used to want. What do you want now?*

I want you back, brother.

*Ain't gonna happen. What else?*

I want Luca.

*Good start. But your whole life can't be about another human being. What do you want, Oliver Hannigan?*

I want to know what I want.

*Then get your ass out there and figure it out.*

Figure it out. Figure it out. Figure it out. What the hell does that mean? I'm like a soldier without a war, except... there's a war, I'm just not a soldier.

\*\*\*\*

Before I head out, there's something I've got to do.

I've dialed the number a thousand times before, so even though it's not in my cell phone, it doesn't keep me from calling. I don't know why I wouldn't call from my own line, except... maybe I'm hopeful if she's using caller ID, she might answer simply because she doesn't know the number.

Half a ring and there's her voice, just like I remember it.

"Hello?"

My crazy bitch of a friend who blocked me and ignored me and...

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth."

There's a long pause, and I wonder if she's trying to figure out who I am or if she's trying to get her head together. When she replies, her voice is a little shaky. "Um, h-hi, Ollie. How are you?"

"Not awful." C'mon, Ollie. This may be the last time you two ever talk. At least make it worth your while. "Actually, I'm doing really good. I'm moving to Missouri."

"Missouri?" she says. "When?"

"I dunno, whenever I get off the phone with you."

There's another uncertain pause. "Then I better keep you on the line for a while, huh?"

The conversation is slow going at first. Each of us is uncertain what to say to the other, and we dance around in stiff, measured movements. I don't want to upset her; she doesn't want to upset me. But then I say something that makes her laugh, and she does that little snort thing she does when she thinks something is really funny, and I laugh too.

"Ollie?" she says. "I'm so sorry. About Benjam... About the way I acted... About..."

"Blocking me?" I can't help but ask.

"Yeah, about that too."

"Well, I probably deserved it."

"You didn't!"

"Nah, I did. You were a good friend to me, Elizabeth. You've always been. I'm sorry I acted like a douche."

"If I say you don't have anything to apologize for, we're just going to run around and around in circles."

"Then don't say it. Tell me what you've been up to. Keep me on the line for a while." I grin as I ask, "Are you seeing anyone interesting these days?"

"He friggin' *told you!*" she accuses.

“You wanted him to keep it a secret?”

“Well... I kinda hoped to tell you myself someday.”

Everything about talking with Elizabeth now is just like it was before Benjam died. She asks me ridiculous questions with all the seriousness of asking how someone's terminal illness is progressing. What does my hair look like now? Had I heard that Ellen DeGeneres is coming back on television with some sort of talk show? And finally, she knew Michelle volunteered at Hearts & Paws, did I think she was cute?

“Hey, E? So you and Chandler, right?”

“Yep! I finally wore him down.”

“And you asking about Michelle?”

“I know you're moving, but wouldn't that be adorable? You could do a long-distance thing and we could go on double dates and stuff when you're back in town. Movies or bowling or whatever couples in groups do together.”

“Yeah, um... So listen, about secrets and significant others...”

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## Chapter Twenty-Two

I don't even bother stopping by the cabin when I arrive in Oster Creek, but head straight for the bait and tackle shop instead.

There's a couple of guys already inside, chatting with Luca about trout. (Which, not a very interesting subject, by the way.) I really want them to go away, but it's not like I can shout, "Hey, assholes, get on your Harleys and drive away so my boyfriend and I can bang in the storage closet!"

So I walk around the store and pretend I'm really interested in the snack aisle. Funions? Or Haribo gummies? Gosh, choices! Am I right?

I keep trying to catch Luca's eye, but he's pointedly ignoring me.

I wonder if he's thinking what I'm thinking—or more than likely, trying *not* to think what I'm thinking.

Jesus, will these guys ever leave? I wonder if I let out something silent and deadly if they might disperse. I grin to myself and go to look at the live bait. Luca has crawdads and earthworms, goldfish and minnows, crickets, and jars of something called half shad?

I've only ever been fishing once in my entire life, and all I remember was Paw-Paw asking me if I wanted to tear the worm. I freaked out and hid behind Gram. (I was a little kid, don't give me grief.) Oh, and Benjam caught a fish. I don't actually remember him catching the fish, but I know the picture. He's standing there with his neon green cap and socks halfway up his shins, holding this dinky-ass fish. Man, he was proud.

The bell above the door rings, and I look up. Miracle upon miracle, the fishermen/biker dudes are leaving, and it's just me and the proprietor. Alone. In this super fishy smelling store.

"What's half shad?" I ask in a teasingly sultry voice as I make my way up to the counter.

"Fifty percent of a whole shad," Luca replies, and leans over to steal the briefest kiss.

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I have never made love in a storage closet before, and there's an illicit excitement as we sneak in and Luca locks the door.

There's one window set high up near the ceiling, small and rectangular. Who knows how long it's been since anyone's cleaned it, but the grime and cobwebs filter the light so that the room is illuminated in a dirty yellow glow.

I step toward Luca and slowly begin to unbutton his shirt, stealing extra touches with each button I undo. He watches my hands, shivering at the caress. When I've finished with his shirt, he helps me out of mine. Arms up, fabric over the head, tossed into a pile in the corner.

What if his customers come in?

We'll be quiet, I promise myself. And then as his hand dips down into my pants and I feel fingertips on my hip, I decide I really don't care if we're quiet or not.

I move as close as I can get without phasing into his body, and press my lips against his. I love the feel of his mouth. I have from that very first kiss—but it's only gotten better, and I've only gotten more addicted to it.

I kiss his shoulder, his neck, his ear.

This is the part where I always go a little crazy. I want to be touching him *all* over, but there's only so much of me. My kisses become more frantic, and I'm more desperate to make contact. His chin, his collarbone, his chest, a nipple—I kiss them all.

Luca gently grabs me by the hair before I can go down past his belly button. With the lightest tug, I look up at him. He shakes his head.

“You don't want me to blow you?”

“No.” He swallows, and I watch his Adam's apple bob. He's as dry as I am, I bet. I stand up curiously. “Turn toward the wall, okay?”

Oh... yes... this I can do. I drop my pants and lean forward, putting both hands on the large cinder blocks that make up the wall. Absolutely yes. I love the way he adjusts my body, tilting my hips, pressing a palm into my back to get me to arch just so, spreading my legs with a firm, helpful knee.

I like being his.

I like being possessed by him.

I like letting him take charge in this filthy storage room.

I gasp as I feel my cheeks part and something wet and firm slip inside my asshole. *His tongue*. Holy shit, I can't breathe—it's like... I don't have words!

I'm embarrassed and loving it all at once. Too soon, Luca removes his tongue, and I die a little death.

"You ready?" Luca asks, positioning himself behind me.

I answer by not giving him a moment to make the first move. Instead I shove myself all the way down on his cock and choke on the cry of surprise and pain that it *still* friggin' hurts when I do that. After all this time.

Luca's so in tune to my body that he waits without being asked, until the pain has passed—and then we move as one. A fluid thrust and ride. I claw at the wall, wishing I had something to climb. I want to get higher.

He strokes me off in perfectly timed movements that get me so close to the edge without sending me over.

Handicapped vet? *Pfft*. I'd like to see a two-armed man hold me and do me the way he's doing. Scratch that, no I don't. I don't want anyone else to touch me ever again.

"Getting close," Luca groans, warning me of what's to come.

"Good," I manage to huff out. His hand is moving faster, his grip's gone tighter, and I couldn't have kept from ejaculating if the entire town of Oster Creek walked in on us right now. With one last thrust, Luca splurts inside of me. Hot. Sticky. Wonderful. I come through his tight grip and the mess splatters the wall.

Fuck my life.

I am so in love with this man.

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I *really* should get a job. School starts later here than the college in Oklahoma I'd been planning to attend. Not that much later, but enough that I've got too much time to think.

The first few days here, I was like a tornado of cleaning. I mean, Luca's cabin was already gorgeous, but I did things like move the refrigerator and clean behind it. And I even made a couple of dinners until I discovered I *really* hate cooking. I mean, loathe it.

Then I sort of ran out of things to do.

I haven't really ever been much of a moper, but lately I haven't been able to break out of the spiral of thoughts. It's making me all kinds of dizzy, and

instead of learning how to make chicken parmigiana for dinner, I lie down in Luca's bed and don't get out.

He finds me there after he closes up the shop one night about a week after I've officially moved in. I've been flipping through the channels on the television for... what time is it? Oh, Jesus. About eight hours.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," I mumble. "Just lying down."

"I see that. Did you go out?"

"Nah."

"Did you get up at all?"

"Yes." And that's not a lie. In my defense, I did get up to pee, then again to shove a snack in my face, and a few times to fix the rabbit ears on the set. The television gets shitty reception out here.

Luca sits down on the edge of the bed, and the mattress sags, making me roll into him.

"You've been crying."

I flush. Dammit.

"It was just something I saw on the television," I say.

This isn't a lie either. I was watching some dumb soap opera. A *soap opera*, for crying out loud! And one of the ladies was sitting on her bed, holding her husband's wedding ring, and talking to him. At that point I was watching it in a numb kind of way. *Television... on... Television... is... good*. But then this character gets really passionate—'cause her husband was a cop killed in the line of duty or something—and she goes on this super long monologue about how much she misses him, and how hard it is to carry on, but she knew he'd had a good death, and she was proud.

Stupid dialogue with a cheesy overacting actress, but I still start bawling like a baby.

A *good death*.

That's how they say Benjam died. A *good death*.

And all day long it keeps popping into my head. A *good death, a good death*, until the words don't mean anything anymore. What is a good death

anyway? Sgt. Benjam Hannigan fought for our country's freedom and *that's* good, but is him being dead, *good?*

Would Luca being dead be good?

What if the IED had taken him out completely instead of blowing off his arm?

What if he'd bled out in the desert instead of being here with me?

Is that *good?* If the reason you're fighting is good, does it follow that the dying is good too?

I got so fucked up in these thoughts that I couldn't stop the crying long enough to take a breath. I cried for hours—but once I finally calmed down, I was done. It was a faucet. *Off.* No more tears.

And that's been a while ago—I thought the redness in my face would have gone away. Apparently not.

"Just thinking about my brother. No big."

"That why you didn't get out of bed?"

"I was just figuring some things out."

"Well, get up and help me make dinner while you figure things out. That cute ass of yours can get you out of a lot of trouble, but it's not going to pay your share of the mortgage—that means chores. So c'mon."

Getting out of bed is one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do.

I want to bury myself deeper. I want to hide. I want to disappear.

But Luca is holding out his good arm to me, and I take his hand. He's so damn strong. He pulls, I push, and suddenly I'm on two feet.

"Luca?" I ask quietly, walking along behind him.

"Hm?"

"What if I... didn't enlist?"

I wince at the words as if I'm seven again, swinging my replica Michelangelo Ninja Turtle nunchucks like the badass I am, and accidentally hit myself in the face with them. The nunchucks *and* the words.

I feel sick.

Like, really sick—and I yank my hand out of Luca's hold, sprinting to the bathroom.

I dry heave into the toilet, a cold sweat covering my skin like a film.

God.

Fucking.

Dammit.

Coward. Coward, coward, coward, *coward*.

I can't believe I said that out loud.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

I hear the linen closet open and then snap shut, the sound of running water, and Luca places a cold rag on the back of my neck. He's always taking care of me.

"Yeah," I manage.

"Anything other than Twizzlers and orange soda?"

I peek at him out of the corner of my eye.

"You left the trash on the counter."

"Can you just forget about it?"

"The trash on the counter? Sure. This time. But try not to leave shit lying around, all right? I don't have many house rules, but 'don't purposely attract ants' is one of them."

"What I asked before," I say. "Just... never mind."

"All right."

"Of course I still want to enlist. *Of course* I do."

Who the hell am I trying to convince? Myself or Luca?

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## Chapter Twenty-Three

(Un)surprisingly there isn't a school right next to Luca's cabin, and the closest college is a small junior college about thirty minutes away. I spent a lot of time researching it online. If I'm going to make an hour round trip every other day to get an education, the school better be worth my time.

I'm not looking for *top in the nation*. I just want something to help me figure out where to go next.

I wasn't exactly what you would call studious in high school. My grades are good enough to get me accepted into the school, but I have no idea what I want to study. Everything either sounds hard or boring, so I lean heavily on my advisor to make the decisions.

I end up taking twelve hours. Math for babies, science for babies, and how to succeed in college (for babies). Actually, that last class is sort of cool. My professor's name is Dr. D and he's supposedly going to teach us how to think.

Never mind I thought I was thinking for the last eighteen years.

There's a lot of assigned reading, weird stuff I've never even heard of before, *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill and Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*. But it's not *bad*. We do a lot of talking in the critical thinking class, even about stuff that people usually get really pissed off about. And for the most part, my classmates are kind of cool.

I learn about Plato's Forms and what the best cafeteria food is. (Taco bar, obviously.) They bring speakers in and we can go to lectures and concerts for free with our student IDs. There's even a Gay-Straight Alliance. I almost join, but end up chickening out.

I even make a couple of friends.

School doesn't totally suck.

But unfortunately I'm still conflicted. Like nightmares, wake-up-in-terror type conflicted.

I thought moving to Oster Creek meant I'd stop thinking about all this.

I thought I could hide out in my classes.

But I can't.

It's there like a horrible whisper in the back of my mind: Make. A. Decision. Oliver.

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A month into school (and two weeks before my nineteenth birthday) an army recruiter sets up his table on the quad and attempts to talk to the students. Most people walk on by, but there are a couple of protesters, singing "For What It's Worth" by Buffalo Springfield, and holding signs. *Bring Back Our Boys!* one sign says and on the other is written *This Man Is A LIAR*, with an arrow pointing to the recruiter.

My breath catches when I see him.

My heart stops.

This man has come for *me*. I'm certain of it. It doesn't matter that the recruitment officer hasn't even looked at me yet, I know his being at my school is a sign from Benjam.

My feet carry me forward automatically. In fact, I'm not watching where I'm going and I whack my shin up against a planter. I have to bite down on the cry of pain. That's gonna bruise.

The officer and I make eye contact, and he gives me a toothy smile.

I've heard bad things about the recruitment officers—they'll lie to you, people have said. Promise you the world to get you to sign the contract. But I don't need the world. I'm not looking for a fancy job or a specific base. I don't want anything particular except to give myself over to the army.

I can't stand this back and forth any longer.

Mom will be hurt.

Angry.

But I can finally stop *torturing* myself.

I lie awake night after night after Luca and I make love, and all I can think is *make a decision, you loser*.

So I flipped a coin.

Well, not a coin. A fingernail file I found in the bathroom, actually. It landed file side down and the back said *Allegiance*. It was a bank file, I think. Anyway—there it was. Be allegiant, Ollie. Of course I thought, *does this mean allegiance to my country or my mom?* But that was just an excuse.

So I'm enlisting.

"Hello, son, do you have a minute?" the recruitment officer asks. The protesters are looking at me and singing louder. They shift to CCR's "Have You Ever Seen The Rain?" My parents have this album on record. The officer is a handsome guy in his forties, not as good-looking as Luca, but distinguished. He reminds me of a salesman.

"Sign me up."

"Most people want to hear a bit more about the process first." That surprises me. I expect him to dig a contract out of his bag and get this thing rolling. But I don't need a pamphlet.

"I want to enlist. Hand me the papers. I'm ready."

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## Chapter Twenty-Four

“Ollie, what—”

I slam my lips into Luca's, shutting him up. He tries to pull back, but I won't let him. I need him. I need *this*. I need to be fucked until I can't think anymore.

*Please* help me stop thinking.

I push my tongue past his delicious lips and it tangles with his. Closer, I want to be closer. I yank his shirt off over his head, throw it behind him. He does the same for me.

“Bedroom?” he gasps.

We're in the kitchen, and the bedroom is so far away. I drop to my knees, fumble with his belt buckle until he finally helps, and I tease his cock through his boxers. I want this here. I want it now. I bite down on the button and rip it free from the fabric.

“That's one way to do it,” he groans, winding his fingers in my hair. I spit the button across the floor and devour his now-free flesh. Luca lets out a long, pleased groan. Any time a thought tries to get into my brain, I suck on him harder, or push his cock all the way to the back of my throat.

*More, more, more!*

I gag on his head, choke and splutter, and then go back again.

Whatever protests or questions he might have are lost under the power of my mouth. I have complete control over Luca Santini. When his cock—stretched taut and twitching—drips with my saliva, I finally pull him down into the floor. Lay him out on the cold stone.

“Jesus Christ, Ollie.”

“No talking,” I command, wiggling out of my jeans. He opens his mouth to argue, but I climb on top of him and smother him with kisses. Kisses and a very willing asshole, which I push down on him.

No need for lube or lotion, Luca is slick enough from me slobbering on his knob, and besides, I *need* this pain.

I fucking need it.

I begin to ride him, up and down, up and down, all the way to the base. My cock bobs with my frantic movements. Pain has given way to pleasure. Total and complete pleasure. This is good. This is *very* good.

Everything is going to be fine.

Just keep fucking.

Just keep fucking.

Just keep—

Luca's fingers bite into my side, and he thrusts upward, filling me with his hot spray. I lean down and kiss him.

"I love you," I murmur into his mouth and then lean back, pumping my fist over my own erection until I burst and cum splatters his chest. Without ceremony, I stand up and leave him panting in the floor.

"Did you... did you just tell me you love me?" he asks.

I'm naked, cold, and all the thoughts I just tried to shove out of my brain are back—louder than ever. I nod, but I'm not really listening. It doesn't occur to me then that this could have been a big moment for us—confessing my love for Luca. I'm too busy thinking about...

About...

"Ollie?"

How many times do I have to cry before I'm all wrung out? I slide, naked, down the side of the refrigerator. I've hate crying. I hate my weak legs. I hate *this*.

Luca crawls over to me.

Two men, covered in sweat and cum, naked on the kitchen floor. He pulls me into the crook of his arm, presses the stump of his other arm against my chest to hold me. I cry and cry.

"Shh, it wasn't a bad thing," he promises. "I love that you love me."

Oh Luca, don't you realize I've already moved past that?

He kisses my temple, then my cheek, and then he's kissing away my tears. "If I tell you I love you too, you're going to think it's only because you're crying."

"You love me?" I ask.

Maybe I'm not *so* far past it.

"Fucking right I do."

I snuggle tighter. "I tried to enlist," I tell him. Even saying the words is like reliving the failure in brilliant Technicolor. "I didn't... I mean..."

"Hey, you're okay," he reminds me.

"No, I'm really not. I couldn't... I had the pen in my hand, Luca. I couldn't make myself sign. I chickened out."

Silence follows, and I imagine at any moment I'm going to be a single naked, sweaty, cum-covered man alone on the floor, because this amazing guy, this marksman, this *soldier* is going to leave the mentally fucked-up kid. Why would he stay?

"I'm batshit. I know it. Being part of the U.S. Army has been my dream forever—and I couldn't sign my name."

I struggle to pull away, and Luca grips me even tighter.

"Do you know what Benjam would say if he knew? Do you?!"

"No."

"He'd say..." I spit out the words. "You're a *disappointment*, soldier. Fucking gave up? It's because you're *weak*. You've always been *weak*. You'll always *be* weak. Broken. Loser. Baby. Boy."

I don't know how long Luca's been squeezing my arm, but the pressure finally crosses the pain threshold, and I let out a yelp of surprise. I look down, and his fingers are buried in my flesh. When I look up, I don't see sympathy in Luca's eyes, I see *anger*.

"You're *wrong*." It's a low growl.

I'm not afraid of Luca. I'd relish the fight. Shouting. Fists flying. A bit of blood. Angry fucking. But he's not letting me go.

"Benjamin Hannigan was my best friend," Luca says, "And if you think *that* would have been his response to this setback, then you didn't know him at all."

That snaps the threadbare tether in me, and I yank my arm as hard as I can out of his hold.

"He was *my brother!*"

"But that doesn't give you the right to use his name any damn way you wish."

"I've never been good enough, Luca. *Never*. And now I never will be."

"Well, you're right about that."

His words sear me.

"You're a quitter who is living for everyone but himself. Did you even *want* to enlist?"

"Of course, I—"

"Did you *really* want to enlist? Or is it just because 'Benjam wanted you to' or because 'Mommy said you couldn't' or because it was the *simple* thing to do? Did you want to enlist because it was easier than forging a new path?"

I've never hit anyone before, but I imagined it would sound like it does in the movies: a crisp crack. Instead it makes a dull thudding meaty sound when my fist connects with Luca's face, and when I draw back, there's blood coming out of his nose. Lots of it.

I'm instantly filled with remorse, but foolish pride makes me tilt my chin.

"Let's fucking *settle* this." My words are not so subtle code for: *hit me back, Luca*. Make me bleed.

Instead he stands, the blood dripping off his chin. Some of it hits his chest, some hits the tile. When he speaks, he sounds stuffy. I wonder if I broke his nose.

"Handle your shit, sir," he says, before walking out of the room.

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It's almost two a.m. when I finally slink into Luca's bedroom. Our bedroom.

We've been avoiding each other since the fuck and fight, which means he's been holed up in here, and I've been watching infomercials on the TV in the living room. But when he sees me, Luca pulls back the covers for me, and I don't hesitate. I climb under them and press up against his body. I apologize, again and again, and he apologizes too.

"Sort of the worst 'I love you' ever, huh?" I ask, clutching him.

"Nah." He whispers a kiss against the side of my face. "That would be if you were taking it back. Are you taking it back?"

"No. I meant it. With my whole heart."

“Me too.”

“Did I break your nose?”

“With that weak ass punch?”

I laugh into his chest and hug him tighter. He strokes my hair.

“I was never going to be a soldier, was I, Luca?”

“You would make an amazing soldier.”

“You want to know the worst part? I think I’m relieved a little. I mean, how fucked up is that?”

“Not fucked up.”

“I felt like I was actually paralyzed. My hand *would not* move. I wanted to serve so bad but it’s like... my brain has other ideas.”

“Baby, you tried to enlist—even with your doubts—you think I’m questioning you?”

I’m getting drowsy off his warmth and the late hour.

“I wish I could do something to make you feel better,” Luca says, which, strangely, makes me feel a little better.

“I know.”

“And you may not want to hear this, it’s corny as hell. But do you want to know what I’ve always believed?”

“Yes.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

“You really...” *buy that?* “Uh... that’s how you feel?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Are you religious, Luca?”

A billion hours of phone calls and I’ve never asked him this. I told him a bit about the church I grew up in, and how only a little of what I learned there stuck. Some of the good parts. Be nice to people, there might be a happy place waiting for us when we die, and so on.

“Maybe a little.”

I think about all the little churches we saw along the way.

“Spiritual?”

“That might be a better word for it.”

“Do you really think losing your arm happened for a reason?” I ask quietly.

“Yes, definitely.”

“Benjam died for a reason?”

“Yes.”

I don't let him go, even though I instantly prickle at the ridiculous thought that there was *anything* reasonable about Benjam's death.

“You gonna clue me in on what that reason might be?”

“I don't know.”

I sigh heavily. *Right*. It's easy to say that when you don't have to prove it. Everything happens for a reason... God has a plan... Trust... I met Luca because Benjam died, but I don't like to think about it that way. Trading one for the other. I want them both.

And I don't like to think he died so I didn't have to.

Because I know I couldn't sign my name to that contract today 'cause... well, I'm not the same man since I lost my brother.

It's way too late, and my thoughts are leaping and skipping ahead of me.

“You remember I told you about Benjam stealing that Crash Test Dummies tape?”

“Oh yeah.” Luca's chest shakes with laughter.

“You ever listen to them?”

“‘Mmm Mmm Mmm Mmm.’ Who hasn't heard that one? Classic.”

“But nothing else?”

“Not that I remember.”

“Well, they have this song, ‘God Shuffled His Feet,’ and it tells the story of a bunch of people having lunch with God and asking him questions. He shuffles his feet instead of answering. And one of the guys asks God if a lost limb ends up in heaven.”

Luca snorts. “I like that!”

“You think your arm is waiting for you up there?”

“I love the way your brain works when you are avoiding thinking about things.”

“Right? So, do you think it is?”

“I dunno. But this is me now, isn't it?”

“Sure.”

“Me and the prosthetic are pretty tight. I guess I've accepted myself as a one-armed vet. I've always imagined heaven as a place where you are your ideal self.”

“So you'd be a one-armed vet in the afterlife.”

“Yep.”

“I don't know what I am anymore, Luca.”

“I know.”

“They can't even use me for cannon fodder. But at least I can tell Mom I won't be joining the army... She'll be happy.”

“Baby? Shut up, okay?”

He holds me tight until I fall asleep.

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## Chapter Twenty-Five

I'm a little bit bitter as I dial my parents' number. I know it's not Mom's fault I'm not army material—but it's hard not to be pissed. *She's* getting what she wants. But where does this leave me?

"Mom?" I say when she answers the phone. I don't even give her time to respond before I start to spill everything that's inside of me. "Listen, so I'm not enlisting in the military. I wanted to. I *really* wanted to but..." I guess I don't have to tell her about my hand seizing up and all of that. "It's not for me," I finally manage. "I know you've been worried about this for a while, so I thought you should know."

"Oliver?" Her voice is tight, and somehow I can tell that she's not actually listening to me. I mean, I think she heard what I said, but there's something much larger on my mother's mind.

I force myself to breathe, remembering the last time I got so uptight about the tone in her voice and then it was nothing. Well not *nothing*. Dad saw my naked business. But it wasn't "death bad." No one is dead, Ollie. No one is dead.

"What's wrong?" I ask her as calmly as I can.

She's learned some things too. No drawing out the news, no delays this time. "I've received a call from Sergeant Fuller last night. She delivered a letter to us today."

"Are they denying benefits?" I ask, feeling my blood pressure rise at the thought.

"Nothing like that. This was a personal letter."

"From Benjam?"

It didn't make sense that Benjam would have sent a letter. He was an e-mail type of guy, and then when he was without the Internet, we just didn't hear from him. I think the only time Benjam did snail mail was when Mom shoved birthday cards under his nose for him to sign.

"No. This is from a woman Benjam apparently knew in Afghanistan. Her name is Amira."

"Okay?"

“Her letter says they met when he was stationed in Kandahar.”

I have a feeling I know exactly where this is going. Hot Afghan girlfriend? Who called it!

Mom coughs a little. “They had a brief, hmm, love affair last year, and she’s just given birth.”

“A baby?” I ask dumbly. “Like... *Benjam’s* baby?”

Hot *baby mama* Afghan girlfriend.

“Yes. That’s it exactly.”

“I’m an uncle? You’re... a grandmother?”

“Yes.”

“So... What does she want?”

“She didn’t say she wanted anything.” Mom sounds dazed, like she still can’t believe it. That’s sort of where I’m at too. “But she sent a picture of him. His name is Jamil.”

Jamil.

A baby boy. I have a nephew.

*Benjam has a son.*

“Ollie? Jamil looks just like your brother.”

“So what can we do to help?” I’m in “fix it” mode. It’s easier than processing the fact that Benjam got a girl pregnant and he’s not around to do anything for her. “Should we send them baby clothes or bottles or something?”

I don’t know *anything* about babies. I’ve never even held a baby before. I’ll be honest, they kinda scare me a little.

And then things get worse. It hits me like a trout upside the head: my brother’s girlfriend and his child are in Afghanistan, and there’s a war going on. A war that already took Benjam.

You think a bomb is just going to casually miss a house because a mother and child happen to live there?

“Mom? Can we at least help them get to the United States?”

Mom sounds small and defeated when she replies. “That’s the thing, sweetie. They’re already here. In an immigration detention center in New York.”

Wait... what? *They*? Both of Amira and the baby are in, what, a cell?

“The baby too?”

“The baby too,” she says. “Amira flew into the country almost three months ago seeking asylum and they’ve had a mandatory hold on her and now on Jamil. Sergeant Fuller says her contact at Immigration and Customs Enforcement told her they are waiting to hear if Amira’s plea for asylum will be granted.”

“But the *baby*? He’s *Benjam’s*—can’t he come live with you guys or something? Temporary guardianship?”

“I’ve already asked Sergeant Fuller. I just don’t know, Ollie.”

“So what can I do to help?”

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I’ve been hungrily researching asylum and immigration law. There’s a ton of information on the Internet on what happens when a female U.S. soldier gets pregnant, but I’m having a bitch of a time figuring out what happens when a U.S. soldier gets a foreigner pregnant. I mean there’s *jus sanguinis* which says the baby is a U.S. citizen by virtue of one parent being a U.S. citizen. Plus Jamil was born here. So, double citizen?

Thing is, it’s super easy with American moms. Bam, the child’s U.S.A. legit. But American dads? There’s a ton of paperwork involved. Sadly, it seems like it’s actually *easier* to get Jamil declared an American since Benjam is dead.

So declare him already!

But what about Amira? If they send her back to Afghanistan, the Taliban will straight up kill her. I’m pretty sure that’s a case for asylum right there.

I’ve read some awful shit about those detention centers, too. Like nightmare stuff. People not getting proper medical care, asylum hopefuls being treated as criminals, detainee paperwork getting lost in the system *for years*. It turns my stomach and makes me want to go in, fists swinging.

And see, I also read somewhere that they might just stick them on a plane back home, and that even if Jamil is technically a citizen, he might not even be able to live here until he’s twenty-one, and only *then* would he be able to sponsor immigration for Amira. Twenty-one years? That’s... forever.

And there’s my fear. Twenty-one years is a *long* time and a lot of opportunity to get dead.

“He’s a piece of Benjam,” Luca says when I mention it. He’s right, and I really don’t want this piece of Benjam to die. I feel like we’ve been given a gift—even if babies still freak the hell out of me.

Mom and I talk for a long time about what sorts of things to put in our return letter to Amira. I don’t even know if we can get a letter back inside, but Sergeant Fuller promises she’ll make it happen.

I’m really starting to like that stone-cold woman.

We agree that we want Amira to know about us and want her to know how interested we are in having her in our lives. I ask Mom if she would consider taking Amira and Jamil in, and she doesn’t miss a beat. *Of course.*

Mom e-mailed me a copy of the picture of Jamil. I can’t tell if he really looks like Benjam or not. He’s a baby with little squishy baby features. Plus he’s dark skinned where my brother was pretty light. I have trouble seeing the relation, but Mom insists Jamil’s picture looks just like Benjam’s baby picture.

“I believe you,” I tell her uncertainly.

Mom’s in love with her grandson. All she has is the one letter and a picture, and she’s already in love. I think about them a lot—Amira and Jamil—but the baby is all Mom talks about now.

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“Did you know her? Amira?” I ask Luca tonight.

“No,” Luca replies.

I am a mess of feelings. Excited to have a nephew, frustrated about the situation, scared for them and, honestly, kinda... pissed off. Not at Amira and the baby but at *Benjam*.

“I know my brother was sort of a slut, but I can’t believe he got someone *pregnant*.”

“Accidents happen, Ollie.”

It’s such a cliché thing, though. I never thought of anything Benjam did as being cliché before. “Don’t you think that would suck though? Being an *accident*.”

“Why?”

“Well...” To create life like that accidentally? And did he even care for Amira? He never wrote home about her, Luca didn’t know her. What’s the

baby going to think when he grows up? *I'm a bastard*. Do people still say that? "Bastard" for someone without a legitimate father?

Everything I'm thinking must read right across my face, because Luca touches my shoulder. It quiets my thoughts.

"The second Jamil came into this world, Ollie, there was already one person totally smitten with him. Now your mom is smitten too."

"Yeah, I guess that's true."

"Plus, you obviously care."

He's not wrong about that. Mom typed up the letter from Amira, and I've read it about fifty times—a simple, sweet note to "Mr. Sgt. Benjamin's Mother" telling her, without any uncomfortable details, how she and Benjam had a simple love affair before his unit was moved out. She discovered she was "with child" and gave birth about three months ago. The baby's name is Jamil. She was saddened to hear of Benjam's death, and she wishes us all well. She doesn't even mention the detention center or all the crap she must be going through.

"I'm worried about them. What if ICE says 'go home'? What's waiting for them? The Taliban and RPGs and IEDs and shit that tears up and kills? To have a mother and a baby in the middle of that. It's fucking me up."

I stay up really late tonight. Not even a lay and then a warm bath can put me under. My brain is full of my brother and Amira and the baby.

When I'm not thinking about them, I'm daydreaming about army green.

It feels like everyone has moved on, you know? Luca and Mom and Dad—oh, you didn't enlist, cool, let's go on to the next thing Ollie. Even Elizabeth. I sent her an e-mail and let her know (in part) what had happened with the recruiter. Her reply was a simple *I'm sorry, but I'm not going to lie, I'm glad you're not going*.

Right, great guys, thanks.

Amira.

Baby.

Detention.

Enlisting.

Amira.

Baby.

Detention.

Enlisting.

I think I have some homework due tomorrow—but school is a million miles away, and I don't just mean physically. I wish I could *do something*. I hate this waiting game.

“You reading another book on immigration law?” Luca grunts, and hooks his fingers in the waistband of my underwear. “Turn off the light. You're keeping me awake.”

“Sorry,” I say, pretty certain I haven't moved once this whole time except to turn the pages of the book I checked out from the school library.

“Don't be sorry, just come snuggle up and go to sleep.”

I cuddle up to him, the big spoon to his little spoon, and slip my arm around him. I don't think I'm going to sleep.

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## Chapter Twenty-Six

I lie on my back in the woods, a pile of leaves and twigs cushioning my head. I can barely see the sky through the tops of the trees. I inhale the damp smell of earth. My head is spinning, and I wonder if I can just close my eyes and sleep for a little while.

What the hell just happened?

I went for a morning run to clear the sleep out of my brain. I was going down a new path—what I thought was the path—and it was muddy. How did I fall? Oh, that rock. I must have caught my toe on that rock and gone sprawling. Over and over and over.

What time is it? Have I been down here long?

I try to move, to look and see how far I tumbled, but eh, I'm comfortable here. Achy, but comfortable.

I could sleep.

*Get your ass up, soldier.*

"Benjam?" I groan, looking around again. I can see him in his army green, sitting on a stump nearby. He's fuzzy around the edges, but I don't know if it's because of my concussion or because he's dead.

*No sleeping for you, kiddo.*

"Just a little while. I'm feelin' fine."

*Well, if you want a centipede up your jeans leg, by all means, keep on lying there.*

I feel something brush against my ankle and I leap up, kicking my leg wildly. I fucking hate bugs. I stumble a little, woozy, and grab for a tree to keep me upright.

*Why did we want to be soldiers, Ollie?*

"Because..." The bark is hard against my back. "We wanted to serve. We wanted to do good."

*Right. Service. Doing good for others.*

Good, I got it in one! Take that, concussion!

Benjam flickers away from the stump and suddenly he's standing next to me, his features shifting and changing. I know he's not really here, but I don't care. I can *hear* him. And for the moment it feels real.

"But I failed, Benjam. I couldn't do it. I couldn't sign."

*Are you really so dumb that you think the army is the only way to serve?*

"They don't call it the service for nothing, Benjam," I grunt. "And don't call me dumb."

*Well, stop being dumb.*

I'm fighting with a figment of my concussed imagination.

*You could be a police officer or a firefighter or a paramedic. You could work with Greenpeace, you could, I dunno, shovel shit at a dog rescue?*

"That wasn't—"

*Oh yeah? Tell that to the pups that have homes now. What about Mrs. Sandison? You think she thinks it's nothing?*

"Stop trying to make it seem like *anything* I've ever done has been worth it."

*You could research immigration law every waking hour and try to help a woman you've never met, just because she had my baby. Oh, wait, never mind. You'd never do that.*

"But it isn't..."

*The army? Yep, you're a dummy.*

"Oh yeah. Because I've done so much fucking good in my life."

*You've been a friend and lover to Luca when he was alone.*

"He's done way more for me than I could ever do for him."

*Do you enjoy being miserable?*

"Fuck off."

*Oh, so you do have balls.*

"Benjam—"

*You have a world of opportunity, you have an incredible boyfriend, you have a life to do great things with. But if you really think your only opportunity went up in smoke because you stopped yourself from making a mistake, then*

*why don't you just go ahead and walk about fifteen feet that way? There's a pretty steep fall—you could finish off what you started.*

“I don't want to die—”

*Aren't you already dead?*

“No, I—”

*Well, soldier, you've given up, right? Ain't that like being dead?*

“I haven't given up.”

Benjam lets out a howl of a laugh. I'd forgotten how obnoxious my brother's laughter was—especially when he was laughing at me. I guess my brain's got it stored somewhere.

“I *haven't* given up, you asshole!”

*Oh yeah? Then prove it.*

“What am I supposed to do, Benjam? How am I supposed to prove it to you? I tried, okay? I tried to enlist and I couldn't fucking do it!”

*Maybe try doing something you actually want to do.*

“I did want to—”

*You wanted to be me.*

“That isn't right.”

*You've always been Baby Boy Hannigan. Couldn't catch up with me, could you? You ran and ran, but you never could catch me.*

“If you weren't a goddamn figment of my imagination, I would deck you.”

*I betcha would.*

“I didn't want... You don't hold the patent on enlisting, Benjam!”

*That doesn't even make sense.*

“I *wanted* to enlist!”

*Why?*

“Because I—”

*Liar.*

“Because—”

*Liar, liar, pants on fire.*

“Beca—”

*You are a fucking liar.*

“Get OUT of my head!”

*Sorry, Baby Boy, I don't exist anywhere except in your head. If I get out, we can't have this little heart-to-heart. And face it; you need it since you can't even be honest with yourself.*

“What do you want me to say?”

*I want you to admit it to yourself, Ollie. Why did you want to enlist? From the moment you made the decision, what was your reason?*

“To serve and...”

There's only the sound of a distant bird chirping and the breeze rustling through the leaves. I expected Benjam to cut me off, but looking around, I realize he's gone.

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“Baby, are you okay?” Luca comes to help me as I stumble through the front door of the bait shop. “Your head is bleeding.”

“I fell,” I say. “I think I've got the tiniest concussion.”

“Jesus, Ollie, come here.” He helps me over to a chair. “Let me get something for your head.”

“Luca?”

He's grabs a soda out of the small fridge next to the cash register.

“I saw Benjam in the woods.”

Luca looks at me, and his concern is evident.

“Well, it wasn't really him,” I say, sinking down in the chair and closing my eyes.

“Hey, stay awake. You don't get to sleep with a concussion.”

God, I want to sleep. I want to sleep forever if I can. “He said I've given up, and I got really pissed off at him. I haven't given up, I just... And then he's all like ‘Why did you want to enlist?’ To serve my country, asshole.”

“Hey now.”

“Not you.” I wince as he puts the cold soda bottle against my head. “Benjam. I kept trying to tell him, and he kept calling me a liar.”

Luca shakes me, and I open my eyes. God I want to sleep, have I said that already?

“Why would a figment of my imagination call me a liar?”

“Maybe it knows something you don’t.”

“Serving my country was definitely one of my reasons. I mean, maybe it wasn’t my *only* reason.” Benjam was *so certain* out there in the woods. So certain I was wrong. “Maybe... it wasn’t even my main reason.”

Benjam was my hero.

I always wanted to be like him.

And then I wanted to best him.

I wanted his respect.

I wanted him to acknowledge me.

I’ve never hidden this from myself. But...

Did I really want to enlist *for* Benjamin?

Luca shakes me again. Jesus, I really am drifting off. I can see Benjam again—just the outline of him, sitting on the counter. I don’t want him to leave for good.

“You think there’s something else I could do?” I murmur. I resist giving in to the habit of saying *to make Benjam proud?* Instead I say, “Some way I can help people?”

I think about what Benjam said, about my law research. But that’s stupid. There’s no way I could ever be a lawyer.

Luca kisses my cheek and moves the soda bottle to a different place on my head.

“There are a million ways,” he promises. “And we can figure out the right one for you—together.”

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## Epilogue

I clutch one of Mom's hands and Dad clutches her other.

This is one of those perfect moments where we should all be standing in front of the big windows at the gate, watching the plane land. Instead, we're at the baggage claim, clutching each other like we're all going to drift out to sea if we let go.

People spill out of the exit, and we scan their faces, watching eagerly.

Mom squeezes my hand, and I look at her and smile.

"There they are," Dad says quietly, and Mom drops both of our hands to cover her mouth. She's instantly all tears, and I have to look away so I don't cry, too.

This moment has been a year and a half coming.

Setbacks and appeals, hope and failure, three different lawyers and a second mortgage on my parents' home—have all led us to right this second.

Amira is beautiful—even more lovely than her photos. I understand why my brother liked her. She holds the hand of a small boy, a toddler, and when he looks at me I finally see what my mother always saw.

Benjam Hannigan is in his face. And he's in the boy's spirit too. His mother whispers something to him, and Jamil gives me a toothy grin before toddling across the carpet and throwing himself at me. I don't think, I just scoop the boy up and hug him.

Oh, Benjam. I wish you were here to see this.

Mom and Dad greet Amira, hugging her without reservation and asking her questions about the flight. Jamil chatters to me in Arabic, and I nod like the good uncle I am.

"Can't wait for your Uncle Luca to meet you," I say to the boy. "He'd have been here, except he had an exam. Fancy business stuff."

The little boy nods gravely, and I wonder if he has any idea what I'm saying.

All too soon, Jamil is plucked from my arms by my mother, who coos over her grandson. That will be the last time I get to spend any time with him on this trip, I imagine. Amira gives me a big hug.

“How are you, Ollie?” she asks. It’s the first time I’ve heard her voice, even though we’ve been corresponding for the last year. In a way, she sounds like I imagined she would. Quietly sweet. Instead of talking about her own trials, she asks about me. “Did you pass your certification?”

I nod shyly.

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Tonight I can’t sleep.

Luca and I made love thoroughly, and I’m drowsy, but I just can’t give in and let sleep take me. Maybe it’s the excitement of Amira and Jamil finally getting their green cards, or maybe it’s knowing that in less than two weeks, I start as a volunteer firefighter at Oster Creek Fire & Rescue.

Maybe it’s Professor Ladd promising to give me a recommendation to Cornell Law after I graduate.

But maybe it’s lying in the arms of the man I love, feeling his sweet breath on my neck, and knowing we’ll keep each other safe, no matter what comes.

“I love you so much, Luca Santini,” I whisper into the still darkness.

“Love you, too, Ollie.”

“Remember when you said everything happens for a reason?”

“I’ve said it a bunch of times. When specifically?”

“The first time.”

“Yeah, guess so,” he fibs. It doesn’t matter. I don’t need him to remember the exact instance, because I do.

“You were right. It’s like magic, sorta, the way all the pieces fit together. And you called it, didn’t you? My Great Santini.”

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Raine O'Tierney wants to change the world... one sweet story at a time.*

*Known as "The Queen of the Sweetness" (well, a few people have said it anyway!) Raine loves writing sweet, character-driven stories about first loves, first times, fidelity, forever endings and... friskiness?*

*When she's not writing, Raine is either playing video games or fighting the good fight for intellectual freedom at her library day job. She believes the best thing we can do in life is be kind to one another, and she enjoys encouraging fellow writers.*

*Contact her if you're interested in talking about point-and-click adventure games or discussing which dachshunds are the best kinds of dachshunds!*

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