

SPARROW  
HILL  
STORIES

*Mother*  
ROAD

BREE BENNETT

Bree Bennett

Mother Road

*Sparrow Hill Stories Book 2*

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*For those who crave—*

*The scent of dawn's first breezes as you gaze from the  
balcony of last night's motel stop;*

*The sight of chilled morning dew on the windshield;  
The challenge of packing your suitcases in the trunk the  
same way as yesterday;*

*The taste of roadside diner waffles and burnt coffee;  
The satisfaction of stretching your legs on a rest area  
sidewalk;*

*And the papery crinkle of a well-loved road map.*

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# Foreword

While this book can be read as a stand-alone, it will make much more sense if you read the previous book, *Broken Records*. *Mother Road* takes place between the final chapter and the epilogue of *Broken Records*.

Like *Broken Records*, this book deals with heavy topics at times, including:

- Car accident and recovery
- Cancer and caring for a cancer patient
- Grief and death of a parent
- Anxiety and depression, including panic attacks

# Chapter 1

The road followed the creek, and the car followed the road. Whipping back and forth like a rattlesnake on the attack, the road cut across the endless Indiana farmlands, sun-scorched asphalt slicing through waves and waves of seedling corn.

So much corn.

“We should probably slow down,” said his passenger, clutching at the lap band of his seat belt.

“Nah,” said Nico, drumming his long fingers on the steering wheel. The engine’s drone reverberated inside his chest, thrumming stronger than any heartbeat ever could. “Besides, we’ll be fine. You’re a god, after all.”

“I’m the god of thunder,” Zeus said, stroking his silvered beard. “Not the god of Thunderbirds.”

Nico slid his aviator sunglasses down his nose. “This is a Chevelle. Not a Thunderbird.”

Zeus rolled his eyes and grimaced at the odometer. “What’s the conversion ratio of miles to Greek stadia again?”

Nico dismissed him with a flippant hand wave. The wind wriggled breezy fingers through his wavy hair, carrying in the scent of mowed grass and farm soil. “So, not that I don’t appreciate the company, but



why are you here? Shouldn't you be off debauching something? A cow, perhaps?"

"She was a girl that I turned *into* a cow," said Zeus, his pursed lips at odds with his booming voice.

"Not sure that makes it better, old man."

Ahead, the tightest curve of the old country road disappeared behind a copse of trees. Nico straightened his shoulders, tension slinking into every tendon. There was something he needed to remember about that curve. Something he needed to do.

"I just figured you could use some company," Zeus said, his voice falsely casual.

"This is a dream," Nico said. "I don't need company in a dream."

"Considering you've holed yourself up in your house for the past two months, your subconscious certainly disagrees."

"I have not holed myself—"

"Exhibit A," interrupted Zeus, holding up a finger. Sparks of blue-white lightning flickered around his fingernails. "You're having a recurring dream about the car accident that screwed up your leg."

"Don't forget the coma," Nico said. "I get some sort of badass gold star for that one."

"I fought Titans. You're going to have to do better than a coma."

"Fair point." Nico squinted at the group of trees ahead. They were too far away to identify, yet somehow, he knew they were sycamores, vast and leafy and with a very sturdy trunk.

"Besides, in the hospital, you had your family around you," Zeus continued. "Which leads to Exhibit B. You went home to stay with your parents while you had the hard cast on your leg—"

“See? I was around people.”

“But you stayed in your bedroom the whole time.”

“I couldn’t walk!” Nico gritted his teeth. The breeze from the open window was now an annoyance, and he raised the glass with a huff.

“You had crutches.”

“I needed to rest.”

“You faked being asleep every time someone checked on you.”

Nico tugged his bottom lip between his thumb and index, but didn’t refute the claim.

“Which brings us to Exhibit C,” said Zeus. “The hard cast came off, and you went back to your home. Alone. And despite Exhibit D, the beautiful summer sunshine, and Exhibit E, the fact that you survived a near-fatal car crash and should be thanking the gods for your luck, you’ve stayed in solitude in your house for two months.”

“I don’t think you’re using these courtroom metaphors correctly.” Nico cracked his neck. “And I’m fine. I’ve been resting and doing the physical therapy. It’s all part of the healing process.”

“Nico.”

“Zeus.”

“What did you eat for breakfast this morning?”

Nico’s shoulders slumped. “A s’mores Pop-Tart.”

“Did you toast it?”

“Didn’t need to.”

“And where, pray tell, did you get this Pop-Tart?”

Nico sighed, relenting like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Or in this case, a full-grown man with his hand in the Pop-Tart box. “From the bulk case next to my bed.”

“And what did you have for dinner last night?”

“A s’mores Pop-Tart.”

“And therein lies my point.” Zeus smirked at Nico’s unintelligible splutter.

“It’s all fine,” Nico reiterated. “The doctor cleared me for driving, and I was scheduled for sabbatical from the university this semester anyway. And just so you know, Dante found me a cheap van, so I’m going to drive Route 66 and take time to explore, maybe find myself, and have a lovely fucking time!”

Zeus made a moue of disbelief. “Find yourself? Maybe. Go crazy with loneliness and start talking to yourself like Gollum? Definitely.”

Nico growled at the persistent god, but instead, Zeus tipped his chin toward the road. “Time to slow down.”

Nico nodded, but his right foot paid no attention to the god’s command. It turned to lead and smothered the gas pedal, urging the car forward at a reckless speed. A slick of ice appeared on the road, smooth as a mirror and completely unseasonable. He glanced toward Zeus, a plea frozen on his lips. The god shrugged and vanished as the car hit the icy patch, crashing into one of the sycamore trees. It twirled in the air with an Olympic gymnast’s grace before plummeting into a massive drainage ditch. Then there was only darkness, and pain, and so much blood—

\* \* \*

Nico's surprised yelp rang out across the backyard as he tumbled from the old rope hammock. Clutching at the grass, he gasped like a beached dolphin and was answered with the wrenching pain of a subpar leg landed wrong. Laying on his belly, he gulped in muggy summer air until his chest loosened and the pain subsided.

The specifics of the nightmare were already disappearing, becoming hazy waypoints in his memory. The dream was a warped interpretation of the accident that had sent him into a ten-day coma and ravaged his body, and had plagued him on repeat since the day he was released from the hospital.

Zeus, however, was a new factor. If he looked through a dream journal, he might find some half-baked explanation for the god's presence, but that required getting up and moving and doing things. He'd much rather lay on the ground and grumble. It was his favorite pastime lately.

He worked himself into a crooked sitting position, letting his uninjured right leg dominate his weak and weary left. Since the accident, he had renamed them the Good Leg and the Bad Leg, as if they were rival witches of Oz. The Good Leg only had superficial scarring and through physical therapy, had regained a portion of its muscle mass. The Bad Leg, though, was being quite fickle about recovery. Some days, he could walk without additional help at all, as long as he paced himself. Other days, he clung to his faithful cane while flares of pain ransacked his leg down to the bone.

He scowled as a gentle rapping at his backyard gate disturbed his reverie. His brothers were coming in an hour to drop off his newly customized van, but neither were known for their punctuality. His

confusion waned as a tall figure in messy pigtail buns and a faded Guns N' Roses shirt peeked over through the gate.

"Lu?" His eyebrows perked when his younger sister entered the yard.

She inclined her head, eyes flickering over his body like an electronic scanner. "You're on the ground."

"I was checking the grass to make sure it was growing right."

She peered around at the overgrown lawn. "I think it's growing just fine. Do you need help up?"

"I got it," he said, twisting his hands through the hammock's braided rope for support. He was a tall man, several inches over six feet, and lifting himself was never an easy time. He swallowed any grunts of pain for fear of upsetting Lucy. "What are you doing here?"

"We're surprising you with a farewell party," she said.

That would explain her early appearance. "Are you here to warn me about the surprise?"

"Yes." She pressed her lips into a thin line. "Did you want to be surprised?" Her shoulders cinched inward.

"Better to know ahead of time," he assured, fending off her self-deprecation. If his family were coming, he'd better rid his living room of all the empty water bottles and Pop-Tart packaging, and fast. "I'll go clean before everyone storms the house."

Lucy's fingers worked and twisted at her side, a self-soothing method that gave him just as much comfort as it did her. His sister was made up of many unusual cogs and gears, and he wouldn't trade her for the world. As the eldest of eight children, he shouldn't have a favorite sibling, but he had always been closest with Lucy.

When he was eight years old, and his parents brought home *yet another child* from the hospital, he had gazed down at infant Lucy with an exasperated sigh, and proclaimed, “this one is mine.” Over thirty years later, it still rang true.

“You didn’t cut your hair yet,” Lucy said.

Unfortunately, Lucy also had the ability to state the obvious when someone *really* didn’t want to hear the obvious.

“No.” He took a careful breath, smoothing the rough edges of his unkempt hair. “I did not.”

“Ma’s gonna say something.”

“It looks fine.”

Lucy frowned. “You look like a mountain man.”

“Well, I was planning on posing for next year’s Mountain Men of Indiana calendar.” He fluffed his fingers through his longer-than-usual beard. He looked a little bit like Ernest Hemingway at his scruffiest, but as long as he stayed away from booze and the Florida Keys, that wasn’t the worst thing in the world.

“Talk to Jack today?” he asked, holding the back door open and following his sister into his kitchen.

“Not yet. He played Seattle last night, so he’s three hours behind us. He’ll call when he wakes up.” She looked around the adjoining living room with the same apprehension as the backyard.

“It’s not that messy,” Nico blurted before she could comment. “I’ll get a trash bag.” He reached for the box of bags on the counter. They were normally kept under the sink, but that required an amount of flexibility that he didn’t have back yet, if he would ever get it back at all. “You know, if you’d told me a year ago that I’d be missing Jack

Hunter, I would have said you were crazy. Or high. Or Matteo, since he's usually both."

"He is very missable," Lucy agreed. On cue, her phone rang, Elvis's "Burning Love" blaring from her purse.

"Cottontail?" rasped Jack as she answered. His bleary eyes were half-squinted with drowsiness, but his crooked smile shone bright on the tiny screen. "Where are you?"

"Nico's house." She angled the phone toward Nico as proof.

"Nico! My favorite brother!" said the rock star.

"You called Matteo that last week," said Nico, but he didn't hide his smile. Lucy and Jack had only been married since last December, but Jack was a perfect fit for the Meyer family. Jack's prior family life had been less than stellar, and despite being older than all of Lucy and Nico's siblings, he worshipped them as if he were a stray pup rescued from the cold.

"What are you wearing?" asked Lucy, eyes narrowed on the screen.

"I'm in Seattle," said Jack, gesturing to his oversized plaid flannel shirt and slouchy gray beanie. "I have to dress in nineties grunge style. It's the law. Now give me back to Nico." He rubbed at red eyes as Lucy tilted the phone back at her brother. "Are you all ready for your trip?"

"I can start packing as soon as the van gets here," said Nico. "Dante and Matteo were dropping it off, but now everyone is coming over here."

"Everyone? Who's even around?"

Nico counted off his family members in his head, like a camp counselor taking roll call. “Just the usual Sparrow Hill group. Except Sophia.”

“Oh, right.” Jack scratched at his scruff-covered jaw. “She’s still at theater camp.”

“If that’s what you want to call a highly coveted internship at Playhouse Square, then yes, she’s at theater camp. And I’ll see Ariana in Chicago on Sunday.”

“Oh,” Jack said. “That’s cool.” He tried to stifle a yawn, and it came out as more of a suppressed groan.

“You look tired,” said Nico. The musician looked more haggard every time they talked. Unlike his previous album tours, though, Nico suspected some of Jack’s weariness was homesickness for his new bride.

“Show didn’t end till midnight,” Jack sighed. “Didn’t get back to the hotel till two. Retiring is hard, man.”

“It’s because you’re an old man,” teased Nico. “Forty-one is nearly ancient.”

“Old man yourself,” retorted Jack, flipping him off through the screen. “You’re turning forty next year. Now tell me again about this trip you’re doing. Complete with the awesome grand finale.”

“Okay, so Route 66 starts in Chicago—” Nico began, but he was interrupted as his mother swung open the front door in a no-nonsense manner, carrying a suspicious drink in a plastic cup.

“Good afternoon,” said Rose, nodding at both of her children with a smile that was half Mary Poppins, and half boot camp drill sergeant.



“Good afternoon, Ma,” said Nico in a deadpan voice. “What a surprise this is. I am so very surprised.” Lucy’s mouth twitched with restrained laughter.

Rose’s gaze sharpened on Nico. “Have you eaten yet?” Not waiting for his reluctant answer, she handed him the cup. Nico scowled and took the drink, sluicing the condensation from the cup’s side and wiping his wet fingers on his shirt. Rose brought him a smoothie every time she visited. The drink was chock full of nutrients and proteins and an unspoken comment about Nico’s weight loss. It wasn’t completely unwarranted—he had lost thirty pounds since his accident, his appetite diminished in the aftermath. Still, he had already been lectured once today about his health by a Greek god, and didn’t need an encore from his mother.

“Thanks,” he said, swirling the smoothie with the straw. The thick concoction barely wiggled inside the cup.

She glanced at his scraggly hair and beard. “I didn’t know your barber went out of business.”

Nico groaned. “He didn’t and you know it.”

“Oh.” She raised an eyebrow. “Is the college doing *Fiddler on the Roof* this year?”

“Hey, Buddy,” said his father, Ben, entering through the front door and rescuing him from further follicle-related conversation. He carried a travel cooler that had seen many family picnics and had the scuff marks and chipped edges to prove it. Nico’s younger sister, Elena, trailed behind him, her arms loaded with bulging grocery sacks.

Nico raised the smoothie in greeting and took a modest sip before gagging. How could a drink be both creamy *and* leafy? Rose began unpacking the cooler, building a sandwich spread on the counter. She trailed her finger through the dust build-up on the microwave and shuddered.

“As we were saying,” said Lucy, drawing Nico’s attention back to her phone. “Tell us about your trip.”

“Us?” asked Rose. “Who is us?”

“Hi, Ma!” Jack said as Lucy aimed the phone toward her. Rose tipped her head in greeting before returning to her arrangement.

“Okay, so I’ll start in Chicago on Sunday,” Nico said. “I’ll follow what’s left of Route 66 down to Missouri, and from there—”

The doorknob rattled a few times before being pushed open in a squeaky start-stop rhythm. His sister Lettie stumbled in juggling three plastic sacks, a diaper bag, a stuffed llama, and her one-year-old daughter, Gianna. The blonde baby stared wide-eyed at Nico, sucking on her chubby fingers. Nico lifted his arms and Lettie handed over his niece with a grateful sigh.

“Hello, Gigi,” he said. Gigi gripped his beard with juice-sticky hands. In a low coo meant for the toddler’s benefit but directed at his mother, he said, “You know, if I had known you all were coming, I would have cleaned the house.”

“You should be cleaning anyway,” said Rose with an unintimidated shrug. “Besides, this is a celebration.”

“There’s not enough room in here,” responded Nico in that same sing-song voice. His bachelor-sized ranch-style house was tailored more for book storage and less for receiving visitors. He nuzzled Gigi

and buzzed a loud raspberry on her cheek. “We’ll be packed like sardines. Cranky sardines.”

Rose harrumphed and focused her attention on a plate of pizzelles.

“Speaking of your trip...” asked Lucy with sharp enunciation, holding up her phone. Jack was observing the madness through the screen with a bemused, homesick smile.

“Three weeks,” Nico said quickly before they were interrupted again. “Chicago to Santa Monica. Twenty-four hundred miles. Me, my laptop, a dozen dive bars, retro motels, crazy tourist attractions, a few camping sites, and the open road.”

*And you’ll go crazy with loneliness*, an imaginary Greek god echoed in his head.

“And what happens at the end of that trip?” prompted Jack with a smirk.

“I get to turn around and take the boring but faster highways back to Indiana?”

Jack scrubbed at his face. “Okay, after the Route 66 part but before the boring part.”

“Eh, I get to see Jack Hunter live in concert in Los Angeles. No big deal.”

“Oh, you lucky dog,” said Jack with a melodramatic clutch at his heart. “I hope you get his autograph. Now give me back to Lucy so I can say goodbye before—”

The front door swung open with a careless bang, knocking over his bamboo umbrella stand. In sauntered his brother, Matteo, with the happy-go-lucky grin of a sheepdog and the tousled hair to match.

Nico delivered Gigi back to her mother and waited for the inevitable embrace. “I feel like Bilbo Baggins when all the dwarves kept showing up at his door.” Matteo caught him up in a bear hug, lifting him off his feet as Nico choked out, “You know—*uninvited*.”

“Good,” said Ben, catching a dust rag that Rose had spirited from thin air and thrown to him. “That would be one way to get you out of the house.” He started wiping down a bookshelf before Nico could protest.

Matteo ruffled Nico’s scraggly hair. “I am so digging the ZZ Top look.” He flopped down into an oversized armchair, tossing a keyring to Nico. “The van’s all yours. Gassed up and everything. You just have to name her.”

Nico shook his head. “I’m not naming the van.”

“Come on. You gotta. You’re like a sailor, off to find your fortune on the high seas in your trusty ship, except in this case, it’s a trusty van, and instead of hardtack and gruel, you’ll be eating...” Matteo squinted under the couch. “Is that a s’mores Pop-Tart wrapper?”

The door opened one last time with a slow creak of hinges. Dante, his youngest brother, stood in the door frame with a ne’er-do-well smile and a bottle of champagne in each hand. Dante was a man of few words, but his next soft-spoken sentence sent a prickle of excitement rolling down Nico’s spine. “Ready for your adventure?”

*Adventure*. The very word was enough to awaken the veil of morose boredom that had smothered him these past few months. “I’m ready. Let’s see the van.”

Nico shuffled toward the front door, opened it, peeked outside, and closed the door again, leaning his forehead against the steel

surface. Elena let out a muffled giggle behind him. He sighed, opened the door again, and simply stared. “What did you do?”

The van had been white when he had bought it. Old, white, boring, and plain as a tub of yogurt. Whatever was in front of his house looked more like an Andy Warhol fever dream than a serviceable vehicle. Every inch of its surface was covered in an eye-popping, epic, airbrushed fantasy mural.

“Elena got to my van, didn’t she?” Nico said. His very artistic sister gave him a crushing hug from behind.

“Do you like it?” she asked, bouncing on her heels.

“Well.” Nico bit back the long-suffering sigh of older brothers everywhere. “I’ve always wanted a van that looked like a Meat Loaf album cover.” He studied the vehicle. “Is that a centaur racing a unicorn?”

“Yep!”

“And is that a wizard and a dragon playing...” He squinted. “Monopoly?”

“You shall not pass Go,” said Elena gravely, and Nico burst into laughter. He pulled her tight and smacked a kiss on her temple.

“I love it,” he said, only partially fibbing. “I’ll have the best-looking vehicle on the Mother Road.”

“See? Now you have to name it,” said Matteo, crossing his arms smugly. “It’s too awesome not to have a name. Besides, I customized the inside, so I say you have to name it.”

“Fine,” relented Nico. Matteo could be as stubborn as a mule when he got one of his ideas. “How about...um...Carl?”

Matteo’s grimace nixed that moniker.

“What book are you reading now?” asked Dante, because Nico was always in the middle of at least one book. Or maybe two. Or, okay, at least three. Alright, four, if he were truly honest.

“I’m rereading *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. I might use it spring semester as a chance to talk about fire imagery as it relates to —”

“There you go,” interrupted Dante before Nico’s tangent could really get rolling. “Name it Esmeralda.”

“Esmeralda.” Nico gave a rather Gallic shrug. “Works just as fine as any. If we absolutely *have* to name an inanimate object.”

“Then it’s time for a toast,” proclaimed Matteo, reaching into the open front seat window for a bag of disposable champagne glasses. After fumbling through their assembly, he handed everyone a glass while Dante doled out the champagne. “To Nico, and his adventures with Esmeralda!”

“To Nico!” everyone cheered. “To Esmeralda!” They tapped their glasses together, the cheap plastic making dull thuds instead of the traditional clink.

“Wait,” said his father, his brow furrowed as he swirled his champagne in the cup. “Doesn’t Esmeralda die at the end of the book?”

“Dude,” Matteo said. “Spoilers.”

Nico broke into coarse laughter, his cheeks burning from bubbly alcohol and the warmth of loved ones in close proximity. Maybe his odd dream was right. Maybe he had been spending too much time alone. After all, here was his family, even after his self-imposed

seclusion, cheering for him and his ridiculous-looking, ridiculously named van.

Maybe finally, just finally, after months of pain and recovery and frustration, his life was back on track at last.

And if something in the back of his brain echoed the warnings of an imaginary god, he didn't pay it any mind.

## Chapter 2

Children were laughing. Pickup trucks were backfiring. Cicadas were screaming.

Nico loved the sounds of Indiana in the summer.

Evening fell as Nico and his brothers lounged in the back of the van, watching the sunset over the cookie-cutter suburb. The rest of the family had headed back to their hometown of Sparrow Hill, but Dante and Matteo had spirited up even more champagne and therefore earned a “sleepover till we’re sober” night at Nico’s.

“Can I braid it? Please let me braid it,” a tipsy Matteo begged, twitching hands outstretched toward Nico’s jaw.

Nico smacked his fingers away. “You aren’t braiding my beard.”

“You’re no fun.”

“Does Dante let you braid *his* hair?” asked Nico. The brother in question placed a protective hand over his long mane.

“Fine, I’ll leave it alone.”

“You guys outdid yourself with the customization.” Nico took a vivacious swig from the champagne bottle and passed it to Dante. “Thanks. I really appreciate it.”

“It was pretty fun,” said Matteo. “And nice to have a challenging woodworking job for once. Half my clients just want chair railings and



banisters.”

Nico checked the van’s interior for the hundredth time, running his hand over the twin bed his brothers had installed, with plenty of room underneath for storage. “It’s exactly like I wanted.”

“The fairy lights were Ma’s idea,” said Matteo, twisting his fingers into one of the dangling cords. “To give it atmosphere.”

“But of course. Light and romantic on the inside, and a mobile WizardCon advertisement on the outside.”

“You really like it?” asked Matteo with a sly grin.

“Yes?”

“Enough to grant your little brother the teeniest, tiniest favor?”

“What is it?” Nico held his breath because, with Matteo, a favor could be as easy as helping install a new appliance or as complex as serving as an alibi after the “mysterious egging” of the Sparrow Hill mayor’s house last Halloween.

Matteo bit his lip. “Soooooo...remember my friend Kate from college?”

“Not really.”

“As in, you don’t remember her for real, or you don’t remember her because your brain got bruised and things are a little jumbled?”

Nico glared. “The first. I remember things fine now.” The first few weeks after his coma were full of murky moments, but he was past that stage of recovery now.

Matteo fidgeted with the handle of the swing door. “Her little sister is getting married.”

“Congratulations to her. Get on with it.”

“I need a date for the wedding tomorrow night. Susie can’t go.”

Nico tried to remember other names of Matteo's many, many paramours. "Loretta?"

"On vacation."

"Janelle?"

"Married."

"Louise?"

"House arrest." Matteo play-shoved his shoulder. "Come with me. Be my wingman. It will be like old times."

"Absolutely not." Nico could think of a thousand things he'd rather do than attend. He hated weddings and all the nonsense that came with them—cloying bouquet scents from overpriced flowers, chairs that stayed comfortable for five minutes only, stuttered poetry readings from random cousins with stage fright, and frickin' Pachelbel's "Canon in D" played over and over like a bad one-hit-wonder.

"Come on. We can play Bridesmaid Bingo!" Matteo jutted out his bottom lip in a feigned pout.

"That's your game, not mine. Take Dante."

Dante, who had left the edge of the van to sprawl out on the bed like a drunken praying mantis, raised a middle finger.

Matteo shook his head, his mop of curls falling into his eyes. "He's leaving for another conference tomorrow. Because he's a...."

"Ninja priest to the stars," Nico offered. No one knew precisely what Dante did, nor did he ever explain it. Coming up with possible careers had become a family tradition.

"Possibly exotic animal manicurist," said Matteo with a thoughtful look. They glanced at Dante, who shrugged and took a swig of

champagne.

“Please?” continued Matteo. “It’s just outside of Indy. I have a hotel room and everything. Kate’s sister Audrey is a mess about this wedding, and when I called Kate to tell her that my plus one wasn’t coming, I heard her sister go nuclear in the background.” He shuddered. “Brides are terrifying.”

“I’ll remember to tell *your* bride that when you get married,” warned Nico.

Matteo flinched. “No way. I’m never getting married. Or growing up. I’m happy with adulting on an ad hoc basis.” He punctuated his point by guzzling the last of the champagne and licking inside the rim. “Now, come with me.”

Nico was either too tired or too buzzed to come up with more excuses. “Fine. But I’ll have to drive the van—”

“Esmeralda,” corrected Matteo, giving the van’s bumper a fond pat.

“I’ll have to drive *Esmeralda*. I need to be in Chicago on Sunday morning. No exceptions.” Sitting through a boring wedding was a treat compared to what would happen if he were late to Sunday brunch with their Nonno and Nonna.

“It’s a date!” said Matteo. He smacked a kiss on Nico’s cheek. Nico rubbed at the wet spot in disgust as Dante cackled from the wooden bed.

*Ugh. Brothers.*

\* \* \*

“I don’t even know these people,” Nico grumbled, following Matteo to the front row of vacant chairs. “Why am I up here seeing the ceremony in hi-def? I haven’t sat in the front row of anything since I saw *Snakes on a Plane* in the theater.”

“An underrated classic,” said Matteo with a high five. “The groom doesn’t have a lot of guests. Kate asked us to fill up his side.”

“Have I mentioned I hate weddings?” Nico tugged at the starchy collar of his only suit until Matteo batted his hand away.

“Yours wasn’t bad,” Matteo said, trying to pat Nico’s hair and beard into something more *GQ* and less yeti. “The marriage didn’t last, but the wedding wasn’t bad.”

“It was quiet and simple,” Nico agreed, recalling the ceremony that had taken place over a decade ago. “Not like this schlock.” He waved an impatient hand at the soldier-straight lines of white lilies around the altar. A harried-looking woman paced around the floral arrangements, ensuring each bloom was up to her undoubtedly high standards.

“Ooh.” Matteo’s eyes lit up. “And your wedding had catered barbecue. That was awesome.”

“I would do it again for the barbecue,” mused Nico. He craned his neck to glance around the ritzy hotel reception hall. If the five-star accommodations hadn’t been a clue as to the hefty price tag of this shindig, the decor of the hall was an easy tell. Crystal chandeliers spun webs of light across ice sculptures, opulent silk buntings, and enough red roses to make the Queen of Hearts happy. “Her parents are loaded, aren’t they?”

“Hell yes. The food is going to be fantastic.” Matteo rubbed his hands together. “Not barbecue fantastic, of course. Kate said there’s gonna be chocolate mousse at the reception.”

“Like pudding? That’s not that fancy.”

“No, not chocolate mousse. Chocolate moose. Like, you know, Bullwinkle.” Matteo placed his hands against the top of his head, mimicking antlers. “Flown in from some fancy chocolatier in Paris.”

Nico frowned. “That doesn’t even make sense. Are moose romantic?”

“They must be. That’s how we get baby moose. Mooses? Meese.” Matteo lifted a carefree shoulder. “Kate and Audrey’s dad is the CEO of Moose Tractor Supplies.”

Nico whistled, long and low. “That explains a lot.” Moose Tractors were a big deal in farm equipment, second only to the unstoppable John Deere brand. Every good Indianan within walking distance of a cornfield knew the name. Running that company would definitely fill someone’s bank account enough to afford a wedding like this.

The groomsmen and groom filed into the hall, taking their places at the altar. They looked more like nervous spelling bee contestants than participants in a ceremony of love. “Do you know the groom?” Nico asked.

“Nah,” said Matteo. “He’s from Los Angeles. Audrey met him out there when she was at USC.”

“Oof. LA to Indiana. That’ll be a shock.”

The groom probably wasn’t half-bad looking on a typical day. He was of average height, with light brown hair, a trim beard, and a slender but fit frame. At the moment, though, “half-bad looking” was

generous at best. Gloomy circles rimmed frantic blue eyes, blending into sallow, grayish skin. He would have fit in perfectly on a George Romero zombie film set.

“He looks rough,” whispered Nico, but he was interrupted by the pianist’s first chords. He bit back a groan as Pachelbel’s “Canon in D” filled the hall. *Always with the fucking Pachelbel.*

The bride began her slow, awkward mosey down the aisle, gripping her father’s elbow with an intensity better suited for the gallows. Silken ruffles cascaded from her corseted waist, the hem gliding along the floor like a fallen cloud. But her pink, full lips were curved in a half-grimace as if she had a pebble in her shoe that she couldn’t shake free. The groom’s grimace matched, though his chin was dipped down in a resolved nod. Perhaps they were just a very grimace-y couple.

The young minister launched into the sermon after the bride was handed off in the usual patriarchal manner. He was barely past “We are gathered here...” before Nico lost interest in the ceremony. His mind wandered to vast open roads, dive bars with questionable beers on tap, and anonymous strangers looking for a night of company as they traversed the Mother Road. It was all happening at last. He just had to get through this dumb wedding.

“If anyone can show just cause why they may not be lawfully wed, speak now, or forever hold your peace,” droned the minister, pulling Nico away from his roadside fantasies.

Matteo snorted with incredulity. “Why do they even say that anymore?” he whispered. “No one ever does it except in books and movies.”

Unfortunately for Nico's attention span, no one protested, and the ceremony dragged on.

The groom's hands were trembling now. His nostrils tensed and splayed as if he couldn't get enough air. Nico snapped to attention. Was the man asthmatic or having some sort of attack? No one seemed to notice his distress other than the bride, who was sending a thin-lipped scowl the groom's way.

"Stop that," she whispered, interrupting the minister's recitation of an overused Bible verse. The groom's shoulders drew up at her words. A lone drop of sweat trickled down his temple.

Nico leaned toward Matteo's ear. "Does he look a little—" he began, but the groom's eyes rolled back, and he crumpled to the floor like a broken marionette. Nico stood on unsteady feet and glanced around at the assembled guests. People were mumbling and craning their necks like gossipy ostriches, but no one was *helping* the man. Even the best man had stepped back, his eyes round and his hands helpless in the air.

"Really?" Being in the front row, Nico and Matteo were the closest, or at least the closest who gave a damn. Nico clumsily jogged a few feet to the altar, his brother right behind. He half-knelt next to the groom, barely avoiding his fingers being trampled by the bride's nervous foot tapping.

"Eli!" she said, worry creasing her features as she hovered, unable to bend down with her enormous skirt. "Eli, wake up!"

Nico held a finger to the side of the groom's throat, finding a rapid but steady pulse. Eli stirred at his touch, and his eyes snapped open,

narrowing in on Nico with horror. He held up a quivering hand to touch Nico's unruly beard.

"Jesus?" he murmured. "Is that you?"

"Not your time yet," Nico said, proffering what he hoped was a sympathetic smile.

"I fainted, didn't I?" Eli ran his fingers through messy locks the color of brown sugar, as if fixing his hair would erase the last few painful minutes.

"You did," said Nico. "Do you want a glass of water?"

Eli shook his head and winced at the motion. "Are we still at the wedding?"

"Yep. Two hundred people are watching us right now, in case you want to faint again to get out of the rest of it."

"Oh, no," Eli whispered, giving up on his hairstyle and falling back, his head hitting the carpet with a pathetic thump.

"Eli!" repeated Audrey, her tone desperate and pleading. Behind them, the guests' murmurs grew louder with curiosity, but no one was standing up to offer assistance. Nico muttered about *useless rich tractor people* just as Eli looked up at him, wrinkling his brow as if Nico were something magically conjured during his brief moment of unconsciousness. Beside him, Matteo offered a hand up, but Eli shook his head again and scrambled to his feet, returning to his appointed spot at the altar. His cheeks sported pink banners of humiliation as the guests applauded like patricians at a gladiator fight.

"Once again, swooping in to save the day," whispered Matteo as they returned to their seats. "Do you ever shut down your big brother



complex?”

“Knock it off; I’m not that bad,” said Nico, grinding his knuckles into his aching thigh, trying to force the muscle to release. “Besides, I constantly have first-year students showing up to my class dehydrated and passing out from their first frat party. This is basically the same thing.”

“The rings?” inquired the minister, snapping his fingers. Now back at attention after his previous ineptitude, the best man passed the rings to the officiant. As the minister said a blessing over the rings, some color returned to Eli’s face. It was the same color a death-row prisoner had when they’d given up and accepted their fate, but still, it was color.

With a theatrical exhale, the minister handed Audrey and Eli the rings. Eli reached for his with shaking fingers, but failed the hand-off and fumbled. The ring fell to the marble floor with an ominous clang and rolled away, as eager to escape the wedding as everyone else. Eli let out a startled squeak and stumbled after it, stomping on it with his shoe to stop its trajectory.

Matteo rubbed his face. “I can’t stand it. The secondhand embarrassment is killing me.”

Eli held up the ring with a nervous smile, but his shoulders had a defeated slump when he trudged back to the altar.

“Well, now that we can continue...again...” said the minister through gritted teeth, “Audrey, repeat after—”

“No,” she said, sprigs of white blossoms falling from her hair in a blizzard of petals as she shook her head. Gasps and murmurs spread through the audience once more.

“Oh my God,” whispered Matteo. “This is like *Days of Our Lives*. I need popcorn.”

“No?” repeated the minister, tugging at his short hair.

Eli gaped at his bride, his mouth opening and closing without words.

“Yeah, no,” she repeated, thrusting the ring back into the minister’s palm. “I’m not doing this.”

“What are you doing, Audrey?” shouted her father across the aisle, his harried expression at odds with his perfectly tailored tuxedo. The woman beside him shrieked unintelligible nonsense before she burst into tears, falling into her husband’s arms.

“This is a sign,” Audrey continued, waving her bouquet in the air like Napoleon with his saber. Petals dropped to the floor in wilted clumps. “The fainting. The rings. That weird, constipated look on your face.”

“Oh, God,” breathed Eli, his face flushing as he glanced upward, possibly looking for a lightning strike or falling chandelier to end his misery. Nico’s cheeks heated with sympathetic humiliation. He wanted to offer assistance, but what else could he do except gawk with the others and let it play out?

“Are you—” The minister halted, eyes darting between the two. “Are you sure?”

“I am very, very sure.” Audrey turned to her parents, and her mouth quirked at her mom’s histrionic wails. “I’m sorry, Mom. Dad. I’m not doing it. I can’t do it.”

“You’re not what?” Eli’s voice shook with emotion, but it wasn’t apparent if it was rage or something else entirely.

For the first time that night, the bride's voice was tender. "Eli. Don't."

Eli stumbled backward as if slapped, and Nico tensed, ready to help if he fainted again. The tableau seemed to slow until Eli nodded once, turned to the guests with a self-deprecating smile, and gave a mock salute before traveling down the aisle, hands shoved deep into his pockets. When he passed the first row, his gray-blue eyes locked on Nico's, and his step faltered. Nico barely had time to acknowledge the fleeting moment before the groom was off again, leaving the ballroom with nothing but a slammed door in farewell.

Audrey addressed the guests with an expression that was less blushing bride and more Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*. "Well, there's still an open bar available, and food will be served around 6:30. Enjoy the chocolate moose! Or mooses. Whatever!" She yanked a tiny flask from her bodice and raised it in a toast toward her parents before downing it in one gulp. Then she marched down the aisle, her distraught bridesmaids dabbing at their eyes as they chased after her.

"This is it," Matteo said, slouching back. "This is the strangest wedding I've ever been to. Nothing will ever top it. Game over, man."

And though Nico chuckled weakly in agreement, he couldn't help but think of shadowed, blue-gray eyes—eyes that, for the briefest moment, had been filled with utter relief.

# Chapter 3

*Frickin' Matteo.*

Nico groaned, slamming his open palm on the hotel room's alarm clock, sending it careening to the carpeted floor. Making it to Chicago in time for brunch with his grandparents and sister meant waking up at 4:30 a.m. and hitting the road by five. This would have been a completely manageable task if he had gone to bed at an early hour as planned, but *no*.

*Frickin' Matteo.*

After the Wedding that Wasn't, Matteo had insisted they go to the half-hearted reception for the free, snobbish food and, more importantly, an open bar on a millionaire's tab. Nico had kept his brother out of drunken shenanigans until nearly two in the morning. At that point, Matteo had abandoned Nico to frolic with two bridesmaids in one of the bridal party's suites.

After packing his overnight bag, Nico sent a series of passive-aggressive goodbye texts to Matteo, hoping the text alert would disrupt his brother's alcohol and sex-addled sleep. The parking lot was lit only by straggling stars and fading streetlamps as he made his way to the van. He groaned again when he found that the van's

back doors were still unlocked after Matteo had helped him unpack yesterday afternoon.

*Frickin' Matteo.*

He skimmed over the van's contents to see if anything looked suspicious. Other than his oversized duvet bunched on the bed in flannel bumps—because duvets were impossible to fold, no matter what his mother said—everything was in order. He flung the bag onto the bed, grumbling at a telltale squeaking noise as the bag bounced off the bed and hit the interior wall. With his luck, the ancient shocks would go well before this trip was over, and he'd spend the rest of the drive gritting his molars against every pothole and rough asphalt patch.

Flopping into the driver's seat, Nico leaned back against the gray vinyl and took a deep, clearing breath.

*This is it. This is your big trip. Just because you didn't get any sleep and are in a total shit of a mood doesn't make it less momentous.*

As he ran his hands along the ridges of the steering wheel, though, his chest tightened, that newly developed but familiar iron clench that sent tremors up his backbone and radiated across his ribs in fiery fingers. He took another breath, twisting his shoulders to break free of the panicked response.

*You can do this. You drove thousands of miles before your accident, and you're going to drive thousands of miles more.*

The gripping vise around his middle eased, and when his hand stopped shaking, he inserted the key into the ignition and turned it.

Nothing happened.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Nico forced the key again. The van responded with a choked, mechanical splutter and nothing more.

“Oh, come on,” he pleaded, although precisely who he was begging, he didn’t know. He peeked around the parking lot to ensure no one was around to witness and muttered, “Come on, girl. Let’s go, Esmeralda. Giddyup, or whatever.”

With another grinding twist of his wrist, the vehicle roared to life as if she’d just been waiting for his acknowledgment. He patted the dash with embarrassed relief, and together, Nico and his Technicolor Dreamvan left the parking lot, the hotel, and Indiana behind.

\* \* \*

Returning to Chicago was like taking in a breath of fresh air. Well, maybe more like car exhaust, deep-dish pizza, and hot dog-scented air, but it was still familiar and comforting. Chicago had been his home once upon a time, and even with frustrating traffic that tested Esmeralda’s new brakes, it was like being wrapped in a cozy, if slightly staticky, blanket.

Nico’s headache had eased to a faint thud as he drove into the city, bolstered by spending a king’s ransom for espresso shots at a Starbucks drive-thru. The van didn’t give him any more trouble, although there was a rustling noise in the back he would have to investigate later. Bad shocks were one thing, but something actually falling off his van would mean a delay and a mechanic’s bill.

He turned into the parking garage near Grant Park and inched through several concrete levels, trying to find a spot that would fit Esmeralda's rainbow-colored girth. And then, above the beehive hum of traffic and the mellow tones of an NPR radio host, a chipper voice spoke into his ear. "You know, I think there's one over there that would work."

Nico shouted and wrenched the wheel to the left, missing another vehicle by a few inches. The sedan's octogenarian driver lowered the window to yell dated obscenities as Nico jerked the van into a free parking spot. He whirled around, his heart beating out a panicked drumbeat as shock stole the air from his lungs.

A young man sat cross-legged and cocooned in the duvet, his brown sugar-colored hair wonky from sleep and Nico's Indiana University hoodie half-zipped over a rumpled tuxedo.

"What the hell?" barked Nico, clutching at his chest. His lungs seesawed in and out as if he were drowning. "You nearly got us killed!" Despite their grimy garage setting, his mind flashed to a curved road and a slick patch of ice. His leg throbbed as he took several deep breaths, trying to rein in his racing heart.

The man's forehead wrinkled. "Hey, now. We're alright. We're alright." His crooning tone was vaguely familiar, as were those peculiar eyes. They weren't quite blue, but they weren't firmly in the gray category either. The last time he'd seen those eyes, he'd been kneeling in front of an altar in front of two hundred of the tractor industry's finest.

"You!" Nico gasped. "You're the fainting groom!"

The man's lips twitched. "Well, that has a nice ring to it. Maybe I'll use it as my YouTuber name."

Nico gawked at him. "What are you doing in my van?"

"Well, I guess I was...sleeping?" The man—Eli, wasn't it?—sent him an impish grin that faded into an embarrassed grimace.

"Sleeping?" Nico's voice pitched higher, eyes darting to the rumpled duvet.

"Yes." Eli patted the mattress. "This is very comfy for being in a —"

Nico interrupted with an impatient hand wave. "What are you doing in my van?!"

Eli took a deep breath, folding his hands in his lap. "So, uh, remember my wedding?"

Nico shut his eyes and rubbed the middle of his forehead. Eli must have sensed his impatience because he hurried on.

"Well, I escaped out to the parking lot afterward. And there was this lovely park bench. And since no one came looking for me—" A scant tautness appeared around his eyes. "I just sat there and thought about life, and then—"

"What. Are. You. Doing. In. My. Van?"

Eli clapped him on the shoulder. Nico swatted his hand away like a pesky gnat. "Hang on, hang on, I'm getting there. I was thinking about my life, and then I remembered I had a joint in my pocket, so..." He gestured to the van as if it held the answers to everything.

"What the hell does that even mean?" bit out Nico. His fingers tapped on the steering wheel, steady and ominous, like an army drummer before a battle.



“Oh, yes. Well, look at it! It’s like the Mystery Machine got a makeover from Glinda the Good Witch. It’s a flame to stoner moths everywhere. So I gazed at it for a while and thought about the cosmos and fanciful shit like that, and then when I realized the door was unlocked, I just climbed right in. And I fell asleep, and now I’m here.” Curious eyes peered through the windshield at the familiar skyline. “Fucking hell, is this Chicago? Are we going to see Willis Tower?”

“There is no *we*; therefore, *we* aren’t going anywhere.” Nico huffed, looking at the dashboard clock. “I can’t believe this. I should call the cops, you know.” Eli blanched. “What do you want me to do with you? I don’t have time to take you to the airport or bus station or wherever you need. You’ll have to catch a taxi.”

“Oh.” Eli’s mouth scrunched to the side. “What if I buy you breakfast first? As a thank you for, I don’t know, helping me when I fainted, maybe.”

“I didn’t do anything!” Nico scoffed, thoroughly disconcerted. “You woke up just fine.”

“Yeah, but you were all there like *rawr, look at me, I’m dark and mysterious and know first aid.*”

Nico muttered a curse as he took off his glasses, scrubbing at his overgrown beard. *Two hundred miles.* He had made it two hundred miles before it all went to hell, and those miles weren’t even on Route 66.

“Well, then,” continued Eli with no obvious sign of abashment or self-preservation. “How about I buy you breakfast as a thank you for the free ride to Chicago?”

“You’re not buying me—” Nico stopped at the man’s broad, earnest grin, accented with dangerous dimples. Nico had seen that grin on his siblings many times in his youth. That sort of grin would always win any argument. “Fine, alright?” He flung his seat belt apart, the metal clasp clanging against the door. “I’m having brunch with some family. You can come along. And then I’ll take you to the airport.”

Eli’s smile faltered, but he nodded as he hopped out of the car, slapping at the wrinkles in his trousers. “Who are we meeting?”

“My grandparents and my sister,” said Nico, heading toward the garage’s elevators.

“Oh? Are you from Chicago?” said Eli, falling into place beside him as if going to brunch together after minor criminal activity was an everyday occurrence.

“Not anymore.”

“Indiana then?”

“Yep. Just like you.” Nico spared a curious glance for the man, whose step faltered at Nico’s words.

“Not anymore,” muttered Eli. He stopped. “Hang on, if I’m going to go to breakfast, I should at least introduce myself. I’m Eli Tenney. As you probably remember. From my wedding. The one that went badly.”

Nico didn’t stop his uneven gait. “Nico Meyer. Now hurry up. We’re going to be late.”

\* \* \*

Eli was probably in shock. It was the only way to explain the icy numbness mixed with slight euphoria zooming through his blood. His entire life was in shambles, yet he felt free for the first time in almost three years.

Definitely shock, then. Maybe he needed to be wrapped in one of those tin foil blankets, like a homeless, jobless, love-spurned burrito.

Waking up in a psychedelic van belonging to Paul Bunyan's grumpy brother wasn't what he had expected for today, but all in all, it was shaping up to be better than the clusterfuck that was last night. He would eat a hearty breakfast, buy a plane ticket, and head home to Los Angeles.

Not that Los Angeles was home anymore either, but even the thought of returning to the house he shared with Audrey after last night's farce of a ceremony made his stomach sour. They had started in Los Angeles; it was only fitting he returned there now that they had ended.

He kept his mouth shut as they walked out of the parking garage. Irritation rolled off Nico in tense waves, and Eli couldn't blame him. He really hadn't meant to fall asleep in the van, but once he had gone inside, the psychedelic vehicle had felt cozy and safe. The jeering faces of the elite wedding guests and his own mental self-flagellation couldn't touch him when he was huddled under that fluffy monster of a duvet.

The taller man walked with a stiff, staccato step. It wasn't quite a limp so much as an arrhythmic pause, a jarred step that hit the ground a moment too late, or a moment too soon. Eli was curious

about it because he was *always* curious, but the dogged set to Nico's jaw deterred any questions.

Three people waited outside the quaint bistro, their faces brightening as they neared. Eli slowed as his embarrassment heightened. How exactly would Nico explain his presence? As an old friend? A coworker or neighbor?

"This is Eli," Nico said as the group's perimeter widened to admit them. "He was hiding in my van."

*Or that works*, Eli thought, flexing his fist to prevent an imminent facepalm.

"Well, that's a new one," said a younger woman with a magenta-colored pixie cut. She held out her hand to Eli. "I'm Ariana," she said, pumping his hand with enthusiasm. "I'm Nico's little sister." She was little in title only, standing at least an inch taller than Eli's five-foot-ten.

"Lovely to meet you," Eli said, gritting his teeth at her firm shake that would put most campaigning politicians to shame.

"These are my grandparents," Nico said, gesturing to an older couple. "Giovanni and Claudia Martinelli." He pronounced their names with an intriguing Italian inflection. It was like hearing a song on the radio for the first time, and knowing it would become a favorite. *Intriguing, indeed.*

"Hello, Eli," said Claudia, her fragile hand clasping his. Her voice was peppered with the same accent Nico had used. Her eyes were clear and blue as the Mediterranean. To his surprise, she didn't let go of his hand, merely clapping her other fragile hand over his as if

to claim him. Eli glanced toward Nico and found him staring at them, brow wrinkled.

“Nonna, let Eli go. He’s had a rough night,” Nico said, his frown deepening. “Breaking and entering can be very tiring.”

“There was no breaking!” protested Eli. “Just entering. It was break-free.”

Claudia beamed at her grandson and kept her hands on Eli’s. “I’m not as sturdy as I used to be,” she said, raising her thin gray eyebrow in a challenge. “He’s just escorting me inside.”

Eli was dumbfounded. Where were the unfriendly accusations for his actions this morning? Maybe they didn’t believe Nico and thought he was actually a friend. Or maybe they were making him comfortable and then once he was sitting down to breakfast, the SWAT team would kick the door down to the bistro and arrest him mid-bite of scrambled eggs.

“Ignore him,” Claudia whispered, tightening her grip. He had strong hands—mechanic’s hands—but her petite, time-softened fingers felt safe and protective. “He’s nice, but has the attitude of a jilted wolverine.”

“I’m beginning to see that,” whispered Eli.

“Did you really break into his van?”

“Only a little. It’s a very pretty van, and I was very high.”

Claudia threw back her head and laughed, an infectious sound that made Eli feel both warm and a little homesick for something, or someplace, that didn’t exist anymore. “I like you,” she announced, squeezing his hand.

Maybe they were just overly friendly people. Those sorts did exist in this world; he was usually one of them, after all. But if this situation were happening with Audrey's parents, he would already be in handcuffs on his way to the Cook County jail.

Nico's grandfather, a boisterous man with ruddy cheeks and hair the color of fresh-combed wool, broke into an animated discussion about some sort of paper or book that Nico was writing. The host led them to a long table inside the bistro, where Eli paused, unsure where to sit until Claudia yanked him down into the seat next to hers. Ariana plunked down in the chair on his other side without a trace of hesitation.

"Nonno was a professor of biology," explained Ariana. "He and Nico will go off on rants about academia for an hour if we don't stop them." She poured a mug of coffee and handed it to Eli. He stared at the drink until she took one of his hands and clasped it around the cup.

"I broke into your brother's van," he whispered slowly as if she hadn't understood him the first time.

"I know," she whispered back just as slowly. "Which means you haven't had coffee yet this morning."

She had him there. Eli sipped at the mug, gripping the cup like a lifeline as he tried to decode what Nico and his grandfather were discussing.

"What does Nico teach?" Eli whispered to Ariana, but apparently not quietly enough.

Nico gave him a sidelong look. "Literature. But I'm officially on sabbatical in a week."

“So you have the whole semester off?” His voice shook a little, his brain still dazed from being so quickly enveloped into the family breakfast, as if he were a little lost lamb stumbling alongside a much larger herd.

Nico waved his hand in a so-so gesture. “Eh, kinda. I had to earn the time off, and I have to use it for research time.”

“And you’re going with the ballad idea?” asked Giovanni.

“I am,” Nico said with decisive confidence. “The dean really liked the idea when I proposed it last year.”

Giovanni hummed his approval.

Eli squinted one eye. “Like what Celine Dion sings?”

Nico paused, and for the first time that morning, a scarce smile threatened to overcome his frown. “No. That’s a love ballad.”

“I don’t know. Maybe a dissertation on ‘My Heart Will Go On’ would go over well with you academic people.”

Nico rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to be writing about ballads or narrative poetry. More specifically, legends, folklore, and myths in verse from Ancient Greece through modern times.”

“Celine Dion sounds easier,” said Eli, ignoring Nico’s harrumph.

“Tell us about you, Eli,” said Ariana, patting his shoulder. “Are you a serial carjacker, or was this a one-time thing?”

“Is it really carjacking if he just sat in the back?” mused Claudia. “I think in a proper carjacking, the one doing the jacking ends up driving.”

“How kinky,” said Ariana, earning herself a sharp *tsk* from her grandmother.

“I didn’t— I’m not— There wasn’t any jacking— It’s a long story,” stammered Eli. “But I may have gotten into the wrong vehicle and fallen asleep.”

“Remember that time Jackie Wilkins ended up in the wrong house after that party at the Huston’s place?” asked Giovanni.

“No?” answered Eli before realizing it wasn’t meant for him.

The older man’s eyes twinkled at his wife. “Too many dirty martinis, and he ended up in Beverly Martin’s sunroom singing Perry Como songs at three in the morning.”

“They got married the next year,” said Claudia, winking at Eli before ordering peach bellinis for everyone.

“Not for me, thanks,” said Nico, lifting his car keys. “I’m back on the road after this.”

“Of course, your trip!” trilled Claudia. “Are you excited?”

“Does Nico get excited about anything?” asked Ariana. She squealed as Nico elbowed her upper arm.

“Where are you going?” asked Eli, feeling somewhat out of the loop. Not that he deserved to be in the loop, since the only reason he was here in the first place was his absent-minded approach to trespassing.

“I’m heading out to drive old Route 66. I’ve always wanted to, and it’s a chance for me to take some time and research while still doing that.”

“And this van of yours, is it safe?” asked Giovanni, his bushy eyebrows wrinkling.

“Yes, Nonno,” Nico said in a placating tone. “It was serviced, and I’ve got a tool kit and spare tires. And my auto club membership is



up to date.”

“I will worry about you being out on the road alone,” said Claudia, smacking the table lightly. “What if you get sick? What if you run into bad weather or your van breaks down? What if you get attacked by bandits?”

“This isn’t a John Ford film. There are no bandits on Route 66. Just tourist traps and antique stores.”

“There could be bandits,” she said, pointing at Nico with her fork before whacking her husband’s arm with the back of her hand. “Tell him.”

“There could be bandits,” repeated Giovanni around a mouthful of pancake.

“There are no bandits!” reiterated Nico with a frustrated gesture.

“And if you break down? What if you are miles from a mechanic?”

*Finally!* Something Eli could converse on without feeling entirely out of place. “Oh, oh, oh! I’m a mechanic! I mean, I was. I could look at the van before you go.”

Nico sent him a calculating look. “I think I’ll be fine.”

Eli’s shoulders slumped. Easily dismissed, as usual. Maybe he could try one more time to be conversational.

“Are you from Italy?” he blurted at Claudia. “I mean, obviously not now, since you’re in Chicago, so you probably didn’t drive from Italy to have breakfast. Unless you’re here visiting, and you are actually from Italy. Or maybe—”

“Yes, we are originally from Italy,” said Claudia, taking pity on Eli, for which he was extremely grateful.

“Did you come here together?” he asked.

“Oh, no,” she said. “My parents brought me over from Italy when I was sixteen. I had to leave my friends, school, and boyfriend behind. Suddenly, I was stuck with all these American boys. John Smiths and Joe Millers. Pfft.” She pulled a funny face. “And you know what happened? I crossed the entire ocean and still ended up with the Italian guy next door.”

“That’s so lovely,” Eli said, pressing a hand to his chest. Just because his love life was the equivalent of a bird repeatedly flying into a glass window didn’t mean he couldn’t appreciate it in others. “How did you meet?”

“I met him at the market, and he asked me on a date. He made dinner for me on the rooftop of his apartment building. We watched the sunset. We got...distracted.”

Giovanni murmured something in Italian that caused Claudia to let out a faint gasp and turn the color of a fresh rose. Nico gagged on his coffee and then sniped something back in Italian that was answered with a gleeful cackle from his Nonna and an arm smack from his Nonno. When the older man leaned over and pecked his wife on the cheek, she whispered, “Ti amo.”

*Ti amo. I love you.* An unexpected lump formed in Eli’s throat. He’d never had that sense of rightness with Audrey, and although he was thankful that he had dodged that mistake, Eli had never felt that with *anyone*.

“Hey, Nico,” Ariana asked when the conversation lulled. “How was that wedding you went to with Matty?”

Eli choked as toast crumbs went down the wrong pipe.

Nico froze for the briefest moment before swallowing and wiping his hands. “It was fine,” Nico said haltingly. “The food was good.” He gave Eli a heavy, meaningful stare. “Very uneventful.”

Eli was grateful for his discretion because even though the family was friendly, he didn’t want to answer questions, like *what happened? Or what are you going to do now? Where are you going to live? How will you find a new job?*

The comfortable numbness he’d felt earlier slipped off like a wet woolen coat, leaving him raw and open to a blood-chilling panic.

*Oh, God. What am I going to do now?*

He couldn’t live with Audrey, and he certainly couldn’t go back to his job—especially since his boss’s daughter had just left him at the altar.

“I’m going to use the restroom.” Eli stood quickly, bumping the table and sloshing his water glass. “You know how those bellinis are. They go straight through a person.” He sped toward the restroom, nearly knocking over a young waiter with a tray of pastries. He mumbled out a strangled squeak of an apology.

Inside the restroom, Eli gaped at his sorry reflection in the mirror. He had the same haunted look that he’d had last night while he was dressing in his tuxedo, right down to the fact that he was still wearing said tuxedo. The crimson bow tie dangled undone around his neck like an unused noose, only hidden by the hoodie he had borrowed from the back of the van. He traced the red embroidered logo on the sweatshirt and murmured his predicaments in an Eeyore-like mantra.

*No house. No partner. No job. No future.*

Eli splashed water on his face, because that's what characters always did in movies when they were stressed, but all it did was make him splutter and hack. The door swung open, and to his surprise, Claudia strolled in, half-empty drink in hand.

"Claudia!" he said, blotting his face with a paper towel. "This is the men's room!"

"*Caro*," she said, lowering herself into a rattan chair by the floor-length mirror. "I'm eighty-four years old. I can get away with anything. I will just tell them I was confused."

Eli rubbed the heel of his hands into his eye sockets until dark spots skittered across his lids. "I'm in a bit of a situation," he said, voice cracking.

"The tuxedo may have given that away," she said. "It isn't the usual proper attire for brunch. Or carjacking."

"I didn't—"

"I think you have two options," she interrupted. "We can stay here until you feel better while seeing how many patrons I can scare away." She surveyed him from head to toe. "Or you can tell me what's on your mind, and I can give you the typical grandmotherly advice."

A man strode into the bathroom, unzipping his fly and doing a double-take when he saw Claudia. He hurriedly reziped himself when she toasted him with the half-empty champagne glass, and left the bathroom without a word.

As the door swung shut, Eli blurted out the entire story, from his fainting spell to his arrival at the restaurant, trailing behind Nico like a stray cat.

Claudia studied him, tongue pressed to her front teeth. “And you have friends to stay with in Los Angeles?”

“Ex-coworkers mainly. A few friends. I was mostly taking care of my mother the last few years I lived there.” He didn’t go into further detail, but she nodded with empathy.

“Change is hard,” she said, “but that makes it no less of an adventure. And if a bratty teenager can make the journey from Italy to America and turn out just fine, then you can survive this.” Claudia stood and brushed at her skirt before downing the bellini and leaving it on the counter. “I’m going to go before I am arrested or get us kicked out of the restaurant. Come out when you’re ready.” She met his eyes and said firmly, “We won’t leave without you.”

*We won’t leave without you.* She only meant the restaurant, of course, and nothing else. Eli decided to blame the stinging in his eyes on fatigue.

Claudia headed through the swinging door, but turned back to glance at him. “Did you know,” she said, tapping her fingers against the door frame, “that Route 66 ends in Santa Monica? I believe that’s quite close to Los Angeles, isn’t it?” She shrugged nonchalantly and left the men’s room.

## Chapter 4

Somehow, Nico had become the Pied Piper of jilted grooms, or at least of one jilted groom, who was straggling behind Nico's family as they left the restaurant and gathered outside for the unholy union of a Midwestern and Italian goodbye. "We should get going" was said at least five times with no actual progress, and they huddled around the sidewalk, peppering each farewell attempt with an unrelated tangent. Nico's grandparents seasoned the proceedings with an extra side of Italian smothering, familial guilt, and endless cheek squeezes.

"Call us every night," Nonna said, patting Nico's face. It wasn't very intimidating since she had to stand on her tippy toes to reach his cheeks, and even then, it was more of a futile tap on his lower jaw. "And get a haircut while you're out there."

"I'll call you when I can," he said, ignoring the second request. "But I don't know where I'll have service or what I'll be doing."

"Or who," Ariana added with a leer. Nico tugged at her short hair before dragging her into a mandatory sibling side hug.

"And Eli," Nonna said. "It was lovely to meet you." She took his hand, just as she had when Nico first introduced him, and Eli's blue

eyes rounded— not in a fearful way, but in an “I just won an award that I didn’t even know I was in the running for” type of way.

“The historical sign for Route 66 is a block away,” Nico said. “Are you guys okay walking over there for a photograph? If I don’t take pictures at every stop, Ma will have my head.”

“Of course,” Nonna said. She didn’t drop Eli’s hand, and he slowed his pace to match hers. It was hard to stay mad at the guy when he was so lovely to Nico’s grandmother, even though he had thrown a wrench into Nico’s trip before he’d even stepped foot onto Route 66.

“Are you okay walking over there with your leg?” mumbled Ariana under her breath.

Nico scowled at her. “Are you taking all your meds regularly?” he said back lightly.

Ariana glared at him but dropped the subject. He felt a little guilty for clapping back at her when she was only trying to be helpful, but he was so tired of people nosing around his injury. He could handle himself.

The Route 66 sign was charmingly retro and seemed out of place on the contemporary street, as if a Time Lord put it there instead of some bureaucratic historical society. Above it, two banners advertising an exhibit at the Art Institute flapped in the breeze off Lake Michigan. Nico went to pose by it and adjusted his stance so that both his legs appeared equally strong. No bent knee, no slanting to the side—just like he used to be.

“Alright now,” Nonna said. “Smile!” She held up her phone and then lowered it again. “It looks silly with just you. Eli, get in there.”

She shoved him with strength that she really shouldn't have had at her age, and Eli stumbled toward Nico.

"Nonna," Nico said. "Don't make him take a picture if he doesn't —"

*Click.*

"It looks wonderful!" Nonna said. She texted Nico the photo, and it took everything he had not to burst out laughing. Eli's mouth was open mid-protest, auburn hair ruffled, dress pants wrinkled, and cuffs draped too far over his shoes. The photo version of Nico was gazing down at him, but for once, he was smiling. It was probably just surprised frustration captured between spoken words, but it had been a long time since he'd seen a picture of himself smiling.

"Alright, boys!" Nonna clapped her hands. "You need to get on the road. Eli, have a safe flight home."

He nodded, his expression tenderly fierce as if he was taking instruction from a revered general.

"And you," she said, shifting to Nico. "*Fai il bravo. Ti amo.* And call me." She reached for her husband's arm and turned away, regal as an empress.

Eli remained silent as they returned to the parking garage, a thoughtful expression on his weary face. Esmeralda waited for them, vivid as a Grateful Dead merchandise stand. Eli slid into the passenger seat and drew out his phone, tapping at the screen as Nico pulled out of the garage.

"They can be a bit much," said Nico, because his family was overwhelming to some people. Not everyone appreciated being



smothered with questions, innocent nosiness, snarky comments, and unsolicited advice by a veritable army of Meyers, but Nico loved it.

“Are you kidding?” Eli glanced up from his phone with a surprised look. “They’re fantastic.”

Nico was oddly pleased by his response. “You can imagine how chaotic it is when we’re all together.”

“There are *more* of you?” If possible, Eli’s eyes grew even rounder. “Were you born in a litter?”

“Matteo was with me at the wedding. He’s my younger brother. He’s friends with your sister-in-law. Uh, former sister-in-law.”

“Former future sister-in-law,” corrected Eli with a frown.

Nico hurried past that. “And there’s five more after that, not counting Ariana. And my parents. And my brother-in-law. And my niece.” Nico paused. “And the cat. And the pig.”

“That sounds like a reality show cast. Hang on—did you say pig?”

“Larry is a highly esteemed member of our family.”

Eli cocked his head to one side. “You named the pig Larry?”

“No, of course not,” Nico scoffed. “That was my sister Lettie. I would have given him a much better name. Ivanhoe or Gilgamesh or something magnificent like that.”

“I’ve always wanted to meet a magnificent pig named Gilgamesh.”

Nico mumbled something under his breath, and Eli pounced on it. “What was that?”

“The van,” Nico said, scratching at the nape of his neck. “It’s, well, it’s named Esmeralda.”

Eli made a peculiar snuffling noise, and Nico couldn't tell if he was crying or suffering from allergies. It wasn't until he was wiping his eyes that Nico realized that he was laughing so hard that speech had abandoned him.

"I'm supposed to be on my honeymoon," said Eli when his guffaws had diminished to the occasional giggled hiccup. "My honeymoon."

"Y-yes?" *Was this some sort of breakdown?*

"We were going to Fiji!"

*Yep, this was definitely a breakdown.*

"I bought a bird-watching book! And really expensive binoculars!"

"That's...a good hobby."

"I was going to hand-feed turtles!"

"I think they would have appreciated that."

Eli's hands flew wildly around with every point he made. "And now I'm talking about pet pigs in a neon van named Esmeralda that I broke into while high."

Nico lifted a shoulder. "You still could have done all that on your honeymoon too."

"The funny thing is," Eli chortled, as if a grown man giggling about reptilian feasts wasn't enough, "this is still turning out to be a better experience than the honeymoon would have been."

And just like that, the laughter was gone. Eli tilted his head and peered at Nico. His face was still ruddy from his hysterics, but those blue eyes were studying Nico as if he were a jigsaw puzzle he had just completed.

"Take me with you," Eli breathed.

Nico paused. “I’m sorry, what?”

Eli made a strangled but gleeful noise that had Nico nearly pulling the van over to make sure he wasn’t dying. “Take me with you!”

“What?” Nico spared a brief glance away from the street to gawk at him.

“Take me with you.”

“I don’t understand.” It was far from the truth, but Nico didn’t want to hurt his feelings. This trip was supposed to be some soul-searching journey, and it was quite challenging to soul-search with someone next to you jabbering away like a parakeet.

“Hear me out before you turn me down. I know you’re all into being yourself on this Kerouac cosplay adventure. But you’re going near Los Angeles, and I’m going to Los Angeles. I should just go with you! I’ll pay for half our expenses—hotel, gas, food, weird antiques you find on the side of the road. Anything that you need.”

Nico flushed. “I don’t need help with money.”

“I can help with the driving too. I’ll drive while you sit in the back and work on your Mariah Carey songs.”

“Once again,” Nico said, fingers tightening around the wheel. “Not that kind of ballad.”

“Right, right, right. You sit in the back and write intellectual, literary stuff. And—the best part—if we break down? You have a mechanic right here!” He said the last part with the self-confidence of a kindergartner showing off a prized finger painting.

“Why would you want to do this?”

Eli glanced at the cars surrounding them at the traffic light. “Because...because I haven’t traveled much of America. I’ve done

Los Angeles, and I've done Indiana, and face it, those are pretty much opposite ends of the spectrum. This way, I can get a little more sightseeing done."

Nico stared at him until traffic began to move again. Eli shifted uncomfortably before letting out a guilty sigh. "Alright. You caught me. I have no idea what I'm doing with my life, I'm freaking out, and I need time to think and find a place and a job." He blew out a nervous breath. "I just need time."

"Look." Nico relaxed his tone. "I know I haven't been the nicest guy today." Eli started to object, but he held up a hand. "I've had maybe two hours of sleep, and then I had to deal with, well, you. But I'm on somewhat of a timeline. It's still a working trip. And I have to be in Los Angeles by the end of the month."

"That's okay; I have enough savings to wait till then. What's at the end of the month?"

Nico was silent for a long time. "I have a concert to attend."

"A concert." Eli looked puzzled.

"Yes."

"Who are you seeing?"

"Um...Jack Hunter."

Eli stared at him. "You're driving 2,400 miles to see Jack Hunter in concert?"

"No! It's just, I guess, a sort of finale for the trip."

Eli squinted at him. "Are you a Jack Hunter groupie?"

For the first time that day, Nico burst into laughter. "Something like that."

"Huh. I mean, I did see the poster in the back...."

“I didn’t put that poster there.” Nico rolled his eyes. “Trust me on that.” He slid his glance to Eli and sighed. “I’m sorry, Eli. There’s no way to say this that doesn’t make me sound like a total jerk. But I’ve had a rough year. Not to say that you haven’t had a rough time, too, but—”

“No, I get it.” Eli’s smile was timid but kind. “You’re doing a self-discovery gig, and you don’t need someone else to intrude on that.”

Nico nodded, his face hot with guilt. But he hadn’t asked Eli to hide in his van, nor had he extended an invite to join him. It was awkward on all levels.

Eli was silent, then said brightly, “That’s fair. It was just a thought. A crazy thought. Never mind.”

Nico had known the man less than twenty-four hours, but even he could tell it was false bravado. They remained quiet for the rest of the way to the airport, Nico concentrating on the road and Eli staring at the window, chewing on the side of his thumb. The atmosphere in the car felt strange and anticipatory in a sad sort of way as if it were the last day of summer camp when your bags were packed, but you still had one night left. It made no sense. Nico rubbed at his sternum, willing the discomfiting feeling to disappear.

He pulled up to the curbside drop-off at O’Hare, skirting the van past jaywalking tourists and business travelers. Eli hopped out, clutching his phone in one hand like a lifeline and his wallet in the other. There was a faded red A in swooping lettering on the front of the navy wallet. Nico wondered what the A stood for. Annoying? Awkward?

Eli nodded at Nico with a bright smile. “Thanks for letting me stow away on your adventure for a few hours. And good luck to you.”

Ugh. A for amenable, maybe. Affable, amicable, accommodating. Might as well throw in attractive too. And here Nico was, abrupt and apathetic. Probably an asshole.

“Same to you,” said Nico.

Eli shut the door, heading toward an airport employee and waving in that ridiculously cheery manner as if he and the employee were the best of friends. It was proof enough that this was all for the best. Several weeks in a car with the adult male version of Elmo could only end in chaos. Or maybe tickles, which was even scarier.

Nico definitely needed some sleep. Time to get on the road, get to the first campsite, and snooze the past twenty-four hours away. He wouldn't even work on his research. Maybe he'd have a ceremonial s'more, but then he would sleep all of this off and start fresh.

He pulled out into traffic, ducking his head back and forth as he searched for exits to the highway. He got onto the busy freeway, cracking his neck back and forth to relax the tension as he began his journey to find himself alone.

A for alone. Alone, alone, alone.

*Find yourself? Maybe. Go crazy with loneliness and start talking to yourself like Gollum? Definitely.*

“Fantastic. Now I'm listening to the Greek god that lives in my head,” he muttered, shaking off the thought. There was absolutely no reason to regret dropping Eli off at the airport. He barely knew the

man. He could be a happy-go-lucky serial killer who preyed on single limping men in rainbow vans and stole their hoodies and—

“He still has my hoodie!” said Nico, smacking the turn signal indicator and making his way to the exit ramp. A \$19.99 knockoff college hoodie with frayed cuffs was a perfectly valid reason to go back to the airport, after all, and had nothing to do with guilt or the strange staccato rhythm of his heart.

\* \* \*

Nico grabbed his cane—no way was he taking on the chaos of O’Hare without it— and limp-sprinted his way through the sliding doors. He was already regretting this crazy scheme. No one just *found* someone at the airport. Real life wasn’t *Sleepless in Seattle*.

“Nico?”

Nico halted at the sound of his name. Apparently, it *was* possible to just find someone at the airport. He pivoted to see a skinny straggler perched on a bench like a little lost eaglet, his tuxedo-clad legs folded in a pretzel.

“Eli!” he tried to catch his breath as he wove through a crowd of travelers blocking his way. “What are you doing out here?”

“Trying to pick a flight,” Eli said, holding up his phone. “Can’t go through TSA till I get it all set up, and I haven’t found a good one yet.” He cocked his head at Nico. “What are you doing here?”

“Well...you see...you still have my hoodie.”

“I...do...” said Eli slowly, frowning down at the sweatshirt. “Just one sec.” He undid the zipper and shrugged it off, tossing it to Nico. The balled garment bounced off Nico’s shoulder and fell to the floor, where a suitcase trolley promptly rolled over it.

Nico stared at the sweatshirt. There was his hoodie. It was time to go. And yet—

“Eli, just tell me this—are you a serial killer?”

Eli tipped his head further to the side. “No. Do you need one?”

“Jesus Christ,” Nico muttered. “Just...come on. Grab the hoodie; otherwise, it’ll take me five minutes to pick it up from the floor. The van’s parked out in the cell lot.”

Eli’s face lit up with that half-joyous, half-bewildered expression he had given Claudia earlier.

“Really?” Eli asked. “I mean, really? Really?”

“Really. Now let’s go before I change my mind.” Nico turned on his heel and headed toward the automatic doors.

Eli scrambled after him as if a zombie horde were after him, tugging at Nico’s sleeve. “You won’t regret this. I promise.” He did a celebratory little dance, nearly shimmying off the curb before Nico caught him by the wrist.

“I’m regretting it already,” said Nico, guiding Eli to the crosswalk. “This is a trial only. If you make me crazy, I’ll drop you in St. Louis, and you can catch a flight from there.”

“I won’t make you crazy,” said Eli, holding up his hand like a scout. “I swear. I’ll be the best passenger ever.”

“And you have to stay quiet. No chitchat for chitchat’s sake.”

Eli stilled. “I can’t help it sometimes.”



“Just try. If you’re driving and I’m writing, reading, researching, sleeping, or just thinking, try not to talk.” There was a long silence. “Well?”

“You told me not to talk.”

Nico turned his head slowly to look at Eli, who looked as angelic as a choirboy. “Regrets. So many regrets already.”

# Chapter 5

Remaining silent for more than a few minutes was counterintuitive to Eli's nature, but he managed it, withholding conversation while Nico piloted through Chicago's traffic. He ignored the dozen text notifications from Audrey on his phone and focused on his mother's picture on the device's wallpaper. Her gray-speckled hair blew in the ocean breeze, messy tendrils suspended in time forever.

*Hello, Mom. Remember when you told me never to get in cars with strangers? Yeah, about that...*

His life had collapsed in on itself like a wobbly Jenga tower. He had no idea what to do next, although he now had a map to navigate his way. Not one that would fix all his problems, but it was the principle of the thing. Nico had given Eli his spare paper map of their route. When Eli first tried to open it in the car, he'd knocked over a water bottle between the seats. Nico had let out a half-sigh, half-groan that was sure to be a regular part of the trip's soundtrack.

After mopping up the water with a handful of tissues, Eli unfurled the map again to get comfortable with their route. He didn't quite understand the fascination with Route 66—the Mother Road. It was as if it were some sort of holy pilgrimage where travelers prayed over ancient Chevrolets and meditated on tacky souvenirs.

Eli rooted around the dashboard until he found a ballpoint pen. He uncapped it and started scribbling on the map, focusing on the open spaces that were prime real estate for sketching.

“What are you doing?” asked Nico. Now that they were away from the city, his fingers were somewhat slack around the steering wheel, and he almost—*heavy emphasis on the almost*—looked relaxed.

*Doodling so I don't start babbling.* “Just making some notes.”

Nico hummed in approval. From what Eli had seen in the back, notes and academic documentation were Nico's jam. There was a textbook on the bed with more sticky notes than actual pages.

Eli started tracing out their route as best as he could guess. After a moment, he frowned, pulled the map close to his eyes, and peered outside.

“We're not even on Route 66!” he said before clapping a hand over his mouth. *Dammit, he had spoken.* Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, whatever that meant. Pennies made you gain weight? *Focus, Eli.* “This is the interstate!”

Nico reached over and pulled his wrist away from his face with roughened fingertips. “I might have been a little harsh back there. You can talk. I'm just really, really, really fucking tired.” He punctuated the sentence with a growly yawn and gave Eli a guilty look. “Though, uh, not as tired as you probably are.” He yawned again, prompting Eli to yawn in tandem. “There isn't as much left of Route 66 as you'd think. We'll be jumping on and off highways the entire time. For now, enjoy the majesty of I-55. Or take a nap.”

Eli's phone buzzed again, this time with an incoming call from Audrey, the ninth one since that morning.

"Or," said Nico with a pointed look at the phone, "you could answer that."

"No, this is a perfect time to prove my ability to follow the 'No Talking' rule."

"Is it your fiancée?"

"Yes. I don't think I can call her that anymore though."

"Just get it over with. You'll feel better."

"I highly doubt that," Eli said, but he accepted the call with all the enthusiasm of a scolded child.

"Where have you been?" Audrey's voice trembled with anger.

"I—"

Audrey didn't let him finish. "I get that you're angry. I get that you probably don't want to talk to me again. I really messed things up. But completely disappearing..." Her swallow was audible. "Eli, I came back to the house, and your car was still there, your clothes are all here, you're not answering your phone...I was about to call the police. Couldn't you have called someone?"

"Who would I have called?" he asked. "Your parents? Your brother? Your sister's the only one who ever liked me." She didn't answer, and the silence was irritating. "So, what have *you* been up to since you broke my heart last night?"

"I didn't break your heart," she said quietly.

And as angry he was, it was the awful truth. "No," he sighed. "You didn't."

"I shouldn't have waited until last night to end it."

“No, you shouldn’t have.” He cringed, picturing the gravity of all those sober eyes watching him, condemning him for not being good enough for one of their own. “Public humiliation really isn’t my kink, Audrey.”

“I should’ve done it a year ago.”

“Probably.”

She paused for a long moment. “I fucked the minister.”

“Huh.” Eli reached down into his soul to dig out some semblance of jealousy, but nothing was there. That was a shocking realization, and about twenty hours too late. “Did you pray before, during, or after?”

She burst into laughter, and an unbidden smile found its way to his lips. He’d always loved Audrey’s *real* laugh, not the manufactured one she used around her parents. Her real laugh was deep and a little snorty, like a vivacious piglet, but it was filled with absolute delight.

He sighed as her giggles quieted. “I’m so very, very mad at you.”

“I know,” she said. “I deserve every bit of it.”

“I’m not taking you back.”

“And I’m not taking *you* back.”

“So where does that leave us?”

“I don’t know. Just come home and we can talk. Where are you? I’ll come pick you up.”

“Oh, so about that....” Eli glanced at Nico. “I’m currently on my way back to LA.”

“You’re at the airport?”

“No, I’m...” He tilted the phone from his mouth. “Where are we again?”

Nico glanced at the GPS app. “About an hour from Springfield, I think.”

Audrey’s voice hardened. “Who was that? Eli, did you hitchhike?”

“Uh...something like that.”

“Oh my God, why would you do that? Do you know how dangerous that is? Next stop, just run, okay? Find a hotel, use the shared credit card, and get a room. Lock the door. Deadbolt and chain. I’ll come get you.”

He could hear her rustling about, most likely grabbing her purse and keys. “Audrey, simmer down. This isn’t an episode of *CSI*. And he’s not a stranger. It’s a man from the wedding.”

She paused. “Tell me you didn’t fuck the minister too.”

“No, although that does seem more like my MO than yours.” His voice softened. “Look, we do need to talk about a lot of things. And I have a feeling a lot of it is going to suck. Let’s take a few days, alright? Then I’ll call you, and we’ll do what we need to do.” *What they should have done a year ago.*

“Alright.” She sighed wearily. “Text me every night so I know that man hasn’t murdered you.”

“What if he *does* murder me and my ghost texts you?”

“Eli.”

“Fine, yes, I will.” He hung up the phone, suddenly exhausted by the push and pull of his life. “We should probably eat,” he told Nico, who was staring at the road to hide that he had overheard everything.

Nico's dark eyebrows rose. "I guess we could. I'm really not that hungry." His cheeks colored. "There's some Pop-Tarts in the back if you want."

"Where are we—" Eli paused to see if Nico would flinch at the word "we," but it didn't happen, "—stopping tonight?"

"I have a reservation at a campsite outside of Springfield. Illinois, not Missouri."

Eli shrugged because, honestly, he couldn't really tell the difference between the two states. A little bit of corn here, a handful of chain family restaurants there. It was all the same.

"And I want to test out the new stove."

Eli craned his neck around to look at the equipment in the back. "Is that what's under that tarp there?"

Nico nodded.

"Well, you're in luck. Not only can I drive, help you pay for things, and fix the van, but I'm also an excellent cook."

"Oh, really?" said Nico, not hiding his skepticism.

"Yes, really. I had to when—" Eli stopped. No sense going down that road right now. "I've had to do a lot of cooking in the past few years. I like it. It's a bit like working on cars."

"Because...you use a lot of oil?"

"No." Eli swatted Nico's arm playfully but drew his hand back when the other man scowled. "Because it's a lot of things working together to create something whole. An egg could be a gear shaft. A garlic clove could be the cylinder head. Ooh! Pasta sounds like pistons. Pastans."

"Wow. That was almost poetic." Nico paused. "Almost."

“If we stop somewhere, I’ll scoop up a few ingredients.”

Nico shifted in his seat. “You really don’t have to cook for me.”

“Don’t be silly. What were you going to eat before I showed up?”

Nico didn’t answer, and Eli started to think that his needs weren’t exactly his biggest priority.

No matter. This wasn’t the first time Eli had been around someone who wasn’t focused on taking care of themselves. Not that he was taking care of Nico. Just maybe eating healthy food in his vicinity. And offering it to him. And watching him eat it.

He’d done it all before, and under less pleasant circumstances.

“Besides, it will be fun to try and figure out cooking on an outdoor stove.”

“Are you sure?” said Nico, tapping his thumbs on the wheel.

“Of course I’m sure. Besides, I was planning to break the no-talking rule anyway because I need to stop at a store.” He tugged at the side of his trousers. “All I’ve got is my wallet, my phone, and this tuxedo, which is starting to smell like pot and unfulfilled expectations.”

“You’re in luck. This trip is fully funded by unfulfilled expectations.” Nico flashed a wry smile toward Eli. Laugh lines manifested around his eyes, indicating that there had been some instances in his life when he wasn’t a complete grump. “Fine, we’ll stop and get supplies—and less formal clothes— before checking in at the campsite.”

\* \* \*



Eli sped around Walmart, picking up odds and ends and prioritizing what he needed to survive the next few weeks on the road. Starting from scratch was difficult—how many pairs of socks did he need? Should he get pajamas or just sleep in his boxers? Did he need bear mace? Wait—would there be bears on this trip? They'd be sleeping outdoors. Bears *lived* outdoors. How the fuck did one prepare for engaging bears on such short notice?

By the time Eli had stopped panicking and finished shopping, Nico was waiting for him in the café area of the store, sipping from a bottle of water. He peered into the overloaded shopping cart. “Are you planning on feeding the entire army?”

“It’s not all food.” Eli tossed him a shampoo bottle and a pack of generic boxers, which Nico caught in each hand. “It’s like shopping for my first apartment again, but more mobile and dangerous.”

Nico glanced down at the boxers and blushed before hurling them back in the cart. For someone with the stoicism of a Spartan, he certainly embarrassed easily. “Let’s go then.” Nico stood, wincing and rubbing at the side of his thigh. Eli’s fingers twitched, his need to be helpful bubbling out like detergent from an overfilled dishwasher.

“Do you want to push the cart?” Eli asked, adding a casual yawn at the end to deter Nico’s pride away from the offer of a makeshift support object.

Nico glared at him. “No. I’m fine.” He reached into the cart for a clearance shirt that read *In My Defense, I Was Left Unsupervised*. “I’ve never seen a shirt so clearly represent a person.”

“To be fair, I get into just as much trouble when I *am* supervised.”

“I’m not surprised.” He retrieved two squeeze bottles from the bottom of the cart. “How much hair gel do you actually need?”

“Trust me, I need it. You can’t get this crunch without it.” Eli pinched a strand of hair between his fingers. “Feel this shit.” He grimaced as soon as he suggested it, but Nico’s face relaxed just a little, and he reached out, running his hands through the segment of hair from scalp to tip.

Oh my. Eli wanted to purr and nuzzle his hand like a hungry cat, but thought better of it. Cuddling really wasn’t the next logical step after stowing away in someone’s vehicle.

“Definitely a crunch,” murmured Nico. His eyes cleared, and he shook his head. They headed to the checkout counter in silence, but just as they passed a cardboard display of batteries, Nico let out a faint grunt and stumbled, falling to the laminate floor like the Colossus of Rhodes. Utter shock and humiliation crossed his face, eyebrows raised and jaw slightly slack. Eli rushed over to assist, but halted when Nico’s expression darkened.

“I’m fine,” snapped Nico, struggling to a kneeling position. Eli glanced around and saw a few shoppers gawking. Nico’s lips were pressed together in a thin line, his jaw set, and his eyes hardened.

Eli bent his knee, ready to kneel and pull Nico up, but a cold glare from the man stopped him.

“Don’t you even dare,” growled Nico. “I don’t need help.”

“I just—” Eli’s hand jerked back and forth between them as if his own body were fighting his instinct.

“No.” Nico’s voice shook with embarrassed determination. He moved until he was on all four limbs and then slid his stronger right

leg closer to his chest to push him into a crouch and lifted his body from there. He grasped onto a nearby clothing rack, catching his breath and glowering at anyone who glanced his way.

“I’ll meet you at the car,” Nico said without meeting Eli’s eyes. He stutter-stepped his way toward the entrance, leaving Eli alone with a cart of necessities and a mess of confusion.

When Eli returned to the van, Nico sat in the passenger seat, his face drawn and careworn. He said nothing as Eli loaded his purchases into the back, but once Eli strapped himself into the driver’s seat, Nico held out a hand, dangling the keys between his long fingers. “Your turn.”

Eli took them with the same reverence he would give the Batmobile’s keys. Esmeralda groaned and sputtered as he turned the ignition, but with a little bit of prayer and muscle, the engine turned over, and they were on their way.

It wasn’t until the van turned out of the parking lot that Nico spoke again. “It gives out sometimes.” Eli raised an eyebrow, and he continued. “My leg. But it’s getting better.” He turned with a defiant tilt to his jaw. “It’s getting better.”

“That’s good,” said Eli, keeping his tone Switzerland-level neutral. “Healing is...good.” Not his most intelligent response. “Sorry for uh, helping you. Or trying to. How about, if you ask for it, I’ll help; if not, I won’t?”

Nico’s expression grew stonier. “Are you mocking me?”

“No! But come on, I see someone on the floor, I want to help them up. So if I’m not supposed to do that, I won’t do that.” He

peeked over at Nico, whose stoic face was beginning to soften a little around the mouth in an enigmatic *Mona Lisa* smile.

“Thanks,” he murmured.

“No problem,” said Eli. “You’re the boss on this trip. You make the rules and—milkshakes!” He jerked at the wheel and drove the van into a drive-thru ice cream shop’s parking lot without a second thought.

“What the hell?” Nico startled, grasping at his armrest like a life preserver.

“Sorry!” yelled Eli before lowering his voice. “Sorry. I got excited. But milkshakes! The greatest food in existence. They fix everything.” He wagged his hand at the drive-thru menu, disregarding Nico’s dropped jaw. “What do you want? They’ve got the usual suspects—chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. I suppose you could mix and match any of their ice cream flavors, but I don’t recommend that. Too risky. Better to go with their recommended milkshake flavors.”

Nico’s stare hadn’t waned. “I didn’t realize I picked up a milkshake sommelier.”

“Better than a—what was it you asked me if I was? A serial killer?”

“Yes. You’re still not one, are you?”

“No. I don’t have the attention span for it.” He flashed a wolfish smile. “I’m kidding. Well, about the serial killer part, not the attention span.”

Nico’s gaze flicked over him with baffled appraisal. “I’m starting to understand that.”

“Good. Oh, look, blueberry!” Eli clapped his hands together. “I’m getting that. What do you want?”

Nico glanced at the menu once before turning his attention to his phone. “Nothing.”

“Oh, come on now. Pick one. Key lime? Tutti-frutti?” He lowered his voice to a seductive purr. “Strawberry banana?”

Nico released a tedious sigh. “Vanilla.”

Eli winced. Choosing vanilla was so, well, vanilla. “What about caramel cocoa twist? Root beer float?”

“Vanilla.”

“Vanilla,” Eli repeated, and when Nico said nothing more, he reluctantly placed the order into the squawking speaker. Once delivered, Eli handed the vanilla shake to Nico, who set it into the cup holder, where it melted away, untouched.

\* \* \*

“So, uh, how do we do this?”

Eli’s voice broke through Nico’s concentration as he skimmed the instructions for the portable camp stove. “Do what?”

“This.” Eli flicked a hand at the vacant campsite.

Nico surveyed the barren fire pit and packed dirt dotted with rough grass patches. Eli stood with his head craned toward the sky, rotating in place as if he were gazing at a national landmark, his pert nose scrunched with curiosity. It was somewhat charming, like glimpsing a fey creature in a magical forest—except that he was

again wearing Nico's commandeered Hoosiers hoodie and the beleaguered tuxedo. "You've never been camping?"

Eli's head snapped back to him. "I've built blanket forts in the living room. Does that count?"

Nico rubbed a hand over his face. "No, it does not. Why don't you, uh—" He scanned the area, his eyes catching a patched canvas bag. "There should be instructions in that zipped pocket for the tent. I'll work on the stove if you can do that—"

Eli's face lit up like a summer sunbeam, and he plopped down cross-legged on the ground, tuxedo pants be damned. Nico shook his head and returned to the stove.

Five minutes later, he glanced at Eli, who was grimacing at the tent instructions, his cheery expression decidedly less so. The tent pieces were scattered on the dirt around him. "Do you need help?"

Startled, Eli dropped the pages. "No! No help needed. I, uh, was just checking twice before I started." He snatched up one of the poles, holding it like a marauder's sword. "See? Can't be much harder to put together than a Toyota." He flicked the pole forward to demonstrate with a cocky raised eyebrow and half-grin. The pole, however, was quite familiar with the concept of equal and opposite reactions and flung itself backward, smashing Eli in the eye.

"Fuck!" Nico dropped the piece of equipment he was holding, ignoring the expensive-sounding clatter as it hit the ground. He hobbled over to where Eli was glaring at the tent pole, one hand clapped over his right eye.

"Stupid thing," muttered Eli, casting the pole to the side with a creative curse. He patted at his reddening flesh, grimacing with

every touch.

“Stop that,” said Nico. Although he was sympathetic to Eli’s plight, he felt the inkling of a smile threatening his reliable frown. “Let me take a look.” He stooped over, reaching for Eli’s hand.

“It’s fine,” said Eli, jerking away from Nico.

“Is it?” asked Nico, gentling his tone. “Look at me then.”

Eli dropped his hand and squared his jaw. His injured eye twitched valiantly as he struggled to keep it open before he groaned and let it fall into a teary squint.

“You look like a toddler trying to impersonate a pirate,” said Nico, examining Eli’s eye. “Does it feel scratched at all?”

“No, just poked, I think,” Eli said, his hand snaking up to rub his eye again until Nico knocked it away. “Leave it. It’s fine. I’m fine! Totally fine. Absolutely fine.” He darted his other hand up to pat at the swollen flesh and was again thwarted by Nico. “Stop it! Let me touch my own damn eye.”

“Do you want an ice pack?”

“No, I don’t want a fucking ice pack!” snapped Eli.

Nico reared back, startled by the burst of temper.

“I want to build this fucking tent without it falling down, blow up the air mattress without it exploding, and then go to fucking sleep without one more thing in my life falling apart!” He whirled away from Nico, his back rising and falling with the intensity of his frustration.

Nico scratched at the nape of his neck and peered down at the tent pole, unsure why it had set off such an explosion. “Look, I’ll build the tent—”

“No!” Eli snatched up the tent pole and aimed it at Nico like a sword. “Don’t you fucking dare touch this tent.”

Nico crossed his arms. “Why don’t you take a shower and change into real clothes? You’ll feel better. You’re still in your tuxedo, and there’s no reason to be.” Eli’s shoulders drew up, and Nico cursed himself silently. “I meant, the marriage—shit, the *wedding*—is over.”

“No, you had it right the first time.” Eli’s voice had quieted, but still had that biting edge.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sure it was a, er, traumatic experience.” It had been traumatic enough just to be a witness.

Eli shrugged, his back still turned away. “It was just a tent pole. I’ve had worse.”

Nico took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I meant the wedding.”

“Ah.” His shoulders slumped. “Well, that worked out fine, didn’t it? Audrey didn’t have to marry me, Greg and Marcia will find a much better son-in-law, and everyone else got to eat very expensive tapas.” He aimed the tent pole at Nico, swollen eye still stuck in a squint. “Did you try the garlic and chili prawns?” He leaned closer. “I didn’t, because I’m allergic to seafood. I’m allergic to the food they served at my *own damn wedding*.”

Nico gently took the pole from him. “Not really my sort of thing.” He rubbed at his neck again. “What did you get out of it?”

“Out of what?”

“The wedding. Or lack thereof.”



Eli's expression faded into a neutral canvas. "I need a shower."

Nico glanced upward. "Get back soon. Looks like a storm coming in."

Like the sky, Eli's face clouded over and darkened. "Because, of course, it is." He trod off toward the communal showers, leaving Nico alone with nothing but the scattered pieces of a disobedient tent.

# Chapter 6

Never before had a cheap, cracked-concrete shower ever felt so incredible.

Eli scrubbed every bit of grime and pot smoke and humiliation from his body. Logically, there shouldn't be much of the latter. There was no one whose opinion he actually cared about at the wedding, except for Audrey and maybe her sister. At least he had provided people with a good story to tell, even if it didn't have a happily ever after. But logic and embarrassment never worked hand in hand, and despite distance and time, he still wished he could slither down the shower drain and hide until everyone forgot last night.

He was just as embarrassed by his earlier blow-up at Nico as he was about the previous night's charade. He'd been frustrated when Nico didn't want his help at the store, and yet he'd been just as difficult when Nico offered his own help. As he trudged back from the showers, the remaining sprinkles from the short summer storm felt cold against his flushed cheeks. If a camper passed him, he gave the requisite head nod, but he was so exhausted and ashamed, all he wanted to do was build a tent and then sleep for at least a week in said tent.

As he approached their campsite, he heard the crackle of campfire and...Kenny Rogers? No, not Kenny Rogers. Someone singing Kenny Rogers—not unpleasantly, but not a professional. He couldn't picture Nico crooning old country songs, but maybe he had misjudged him.

The man himself—Nico, not Kenny Rogers—was slouched in a camping chair, decidedly not singing. Instead, he glowered at a tablet propped up on another camping chair across from him.

“I thought when you said campfire songs, it would be ‘Home on the Range,’” muttered Nico. In response, the singing got decidedly louder and less pleasant. “Christ, Matty, I get it; I am fully versed in when to hold them and fold them.” The singing and guitar accompaniment stopped with the throaty chuckle of a man.

Eli stopped dead in his tracks. Wasn't Matteo the brother Nico had mentioned was at the wedding?

“I'll work on ‘Home on the Range’ for next time,” said Matteo, his voice tinny through the tablet's speaker.

“Please don't,” Nico said. “I'm fine. Exhausted because someone didn't let me sleep last night, but fine.”

“Mmm, it was a good night.”

Nico snorted. “What was her name?”

“Kaylin,” said Matteo in a dreamy, husky voice. “Remember the chocolate moose? We ended up taking a handful back to the hotel room and—”

“I don't want to know,” interrupted Nico. Eli was actually curious, but let it slide since he wasn't actually part of the conversation.

“No campsite companions for you tonight?” Matteo picked at his guitar, running through basic scales.

“Reiterating my point from earlier, I’m too tired to pick up anyone. Also reiterating that it is because of you.”

Matteo laughed. “I just don’t want you to mope about, all alone, that’s all.”

“I’m not moping, and I’m not alo—” Nico shut his mouth quickly.

The chords stopped. “What was that?”

“I’m not... I’m not...aloe vera?” said Nico weakly, slumping into his chair.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

And that was the moment that Eli’s foot, unprotected by anything but a cheap foam flip-flop, snagged a rock as he tried to inch closer. He yelped, stumbling into view and missing the fire by mere inches.

“Ah, hell,” Nico raised his eyes and scowled at the night sky. “Matty, I gotta go.”

“Um, no. Introduce me to—” Matteo’s words trailed away as Eli stepped in sight of the tablet’s camera.

Nico raked his hands through his dark hair and swallowed. “Matteo, this is Eli. Eli, Matteo.”

Matteo shifted awkwardly as he studied Eli through the screen. Nico shifted in his camp chair. Eli shifted his feet back and forth. Dammit, everyone was shifting, and no one was speaking.

At last, Matteo schooled his face into something trying so hard to be nonchalant; it became the opposite. *Chalant*, perhaps? “It’s nice to meet you, Eli.”

“You too.” No mention of the wedding at all. Eli wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. He glanced around the campsite for an excuse out of this conversation as quickly as possible. “You built the tent? I told you that you didn’t have to.”

“I thought I’d take the air mattress in the tent tonight, and you could have the van,” Nico said each word slowly and clearly. It was a message for his eavesdropping brother. Eli was most definitely not a campsite companion.

“Thanks, I appreciate that. I’m going to turn in early. Nice to, uh, meet you, Matteo.” Eli gave an awkward half-wave and scurried back to the van, closing the back doors since the windows were open for airflow. He had a sudden, overwhelming desire for total privacy and didn’t want to hear whatever Nico and Matteo would discuss once he was out of hearing distance. He put in his earbuds and called Jaime, a former coworker, former partner, and current friend.

“I suppose I should have come to the wedding after all?” drawled Jaime when he picked up.

“Hey,” said Eli, too tired to snark back. “And no, trust me, you shouldn’t have. How’s the baby?”

Jaime snorted, but it turned into a stifled yawn. “She’s perfect. I’m running on fumes, but she’s perfect.” Eli smiled, though Jaime couldn’t see him. A newborn was a perfect excuse to not fly across the country to go to the stiffest, most awkward wedding ever. “Audrey texted me. Said you’re headed my way.”

“I should have known she would. Did she say anything else?”

“Just that the wedding didn’t go as planned.” Jaime paused. “Are you alright?”

“Alright is a relative term. I’m breathing, does that count?” Before his friend could offer advice or condolences, Eli hurried on. “I’m gonna need a job and a place to stay. Any ideas?”

“Aw, Eli,” said Jaime. “Normally, I’d say stay here, but Gabriela—”

“No, I don’t mean with you. I like babies, but I also like sleeping.”

Jaime hummed. “Let me call around to some of the guys at the shop and do some recon. I can’t promise anything, but I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Thanks,” said Eli. Even if Jaime couldn’t find anything, the idea that he would help out was wonderful. “Now, go kiss your baby and get some sleep.”

“Yes, to the former,” said Jaime. “And nice try to the latter. We’ll talk soon.”

Eli settled back into the bed when the call was over. There was a tiny flicker of purpose tickling his senses, something that hadn’t been there for a while. He could do this. He’d be alright, wouldn’t he? Today, like yesterday, had been a milestone day, one of those days that he would tell stories about in the future, around a fireplace while knitting or whittling or whatever people did while reminiscing. Today was the first day of the rest of his life, and he was off to one hell of a start.

\* \* \*

“Nico.” Matteo’s entire demeanor changed as soon as Eli was out of earshot. He wasn’t serious often, so when he was, it was a little

frightening, like when a devoted dog suddenly bares its teeth. “What are you doing?”

“Camping.” *Yes, be the insolent brother here.*

“That’s Audrey’s fiancé.”

“Technically, I think he’s now her ex-fiancé,” said Nico, poking at the fire with a knobby branch.

“Yes, you’re probably right.” Matteo paused. “But now he’s with you. And I can’t figure out why that is.”

“Coincidence?”

“Nico.”

“He needed a ride. That’s all.” Nico held up three charcoal-stained fingers. “Scout’s honor. Nothing weird is happening.”

Matteo peered at him. “Fine. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Nico scoffed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

His brother hummed and plucked at a few guitar strings. “Remember Bambi?”

“The Disney movie?” Nico said lightly, but he knew exactly where this conversation was going.

“You know who I mean. The fawn.”

Nico dropped his gaze, dragging the ashy stick through a patch of grass. “Yeah. I remember.”

“You latched onto that poor little orphan like a big ol’ papa bear. Or papa stag. Papa buck?”

“I think stags are more badass.”

“Papa stag, then. Either way, that deer was spoiled with cuddles and hugs and those baby bottles with the weird nipples—” He made an exaggerated sizing gesture with his hand. “And when he was

healed, and the wildlife coordinator came to get him? Dude, I may have been six and mostly knowledgeable in monster trucks and Pokémon, but even I could tell your heart was broken. You moped around and barely spoke. And we watched *Bambi* every day for a week.” He shook his golden-brown mop of hair. “Do you know how traumatizing that is for a kid? Every day, it was play, eat dinner, watch Bambi’s mom die, and go to bed. It was like being in a psyops boot camp.”

Sluggish snores drifted through the van’s open windows. “He’s not a fawn,” Nico muttered.

“I know that. He doesn’t have any spots. I’m just saying, I don’t want you to play the hero and then get your heart broken. And I really don’t want to watch *Bambi* for a week.”

Nico met his brother’s gaze as best as possible through a video call. “I’ll be careful.” He lifted an eyebrow when Matteo sniffled. “Matty? You okay?”

Matteo swallowed. “It’s just...when he yells for his mom, and then the dad shows up and is all like, ‘your mom can’t be with you anymore,’ and Bambi gets that look...” He straightened and wiped at his eyes. “I’m alright.”

“Go watch *Dumbo*,” proposed Nico. “It’ll cheer you right up.”

Matteo waved goodbye with his middle finger. “You’re the worst.”

“You too.” Nico ended the call, leaning back in his chair and staring into the campfire. The flames snapped and licked at the remains of firewood like a hungry serpent.

He hadn’t thought about Bambi—the real one, not the fictional character—in a long time. His dad had found the orphan near his



mother's body and brought it home, setting up a pen in the barn for the creature until a professional could retrieve him. As the oldest child, Nico was tasked with caring for the animal, including mixing formula and adhering to a strict feeding schedule. Nico had taken one look at the baby and fallen desperately in love. The deer had followed him around the farm for a week until a woman in a van showed up to take him away. Afterward, Nico had sobbed in his father's arms.

"Sometimes, doing the right thing hurts," Ben had murmured as he held Nico. "But someday, the pain will ease, and you'll think of Bambi big and strong and running around the woods, and be happy that you knew and loved him, if only for a little bit."

Nico had only cried harder, because nothing could ever hurt as much as watching his fawn leaving him behind to start a new life. But Ben had been right, as fathers often are, and after a week of tears and watching a certain Disney film way too many times, Nico had realized how proud he was, how happy Bambi must be in the wild, and how that awful pain was worth it all.

Nico glanced at the van and squared his jaw. Matteo was wrong. The situation with Eli was nothing like Bambi.

Another snore escaped the open van windows, the sound poking at Nico's resolution until it thawed into something else.

Something a bit like tenderness.

# Chapter 7

The road followed the creek, and the car followed the road. Coiling tightly like a brand-new bedspring, the road curved through acres of pristine, soldier-straight rows of knee-high corn.

The only sound was the wind's whistle through Nico's window until his passenger's hand reached for the radio dial and raucous, gospel-inspired show tunes blared through the sound system. Nico gasped, and the car swerved until he corrected it, narrowly missing one of the Amish horse and buggies that frequented the area. He glared at the man—no, the *god*—in the passenger seat.

“Oh fuck no, it's you,” he sighed, because heaven forbid his subconscious provide him with the usual anxiety dreams, like going to school naked or missing all of his final exams.

“Happy to see you too,” said Zeus, settling back into the leather seat.

“What does my brain want now? I'm out of the house. I went to a social event. I even ate two whole pieces of toast this morning!”

Zeus shrugged and turned down the volume to Disney's *Hercules* soundtrack. “It's an improvement.”

“Well? Why the visits? Is this just more judgmental smiting?”

The god fiddled with the air conditioning. “I see you’ve made yourself a friend.”

“He’s not a friend. He’s just a guy that I’m helping out. He’s like a hitchhiker, but more annoying.”

“He’s kinda cute.”

“No. Definitely no.” Nico shook his head furiously.

“You don’t think he’s cute?” Zeus stuck out his bottom lip.

“No—I mean he is—I mean—” Nico growled. “Brain, you are not doing this. I’m only giving him a ride to be nice. Hookups don’t start with being nice. Hookups start with the opposite of nice. Or, in your case, turning into a bull.”

Zeus tutted. “Well, aren’t you a grumpy Gus.”

“I’m not a—” Nico stopped because that was one of those phrases where it would still ring true whether he confirmed or denied it.

“I think you are,” said Zeus. “Maybe you need a little help from your friends.”

“Well, thank you, Paul McCartney, but I’m doing just fine on my own.”

“Once again, you’re not fine. This is why you have crazy dreams. This is why we’re stuck together.” Zeus plucked at his bottom lip, his brow furrowed. “I have an idea.” The Greek god snapped his fingers with a sharp crack that echoed off the Chevelle’s interior. The air was suddenly filled with the scent of burning coal, frosty winter air, and nineteenth-century capitalism.

“What did you—” Nico looked up at the rearview mirror and was startled by an elderly gentleman in the backseat, wearing a badly

mended overcoat and a dingy beaver hat.

“Michael Caine?”

“Of course not,” said the man with a querulous voice. “My name is Ebenezer Scrooge.”

Nico let out a lengthy sigh, thumping his head back against the headrest. “Of course it is.” A headache threatened the base of his skull. “Zeus, are you trying to turn my life into a Hallmark movie?”

“Not really,” said the god, pulling a cigar from his toga and lighting it. “But this is definitely as entertaining as one.”

Scrooge cleared his throat. “Young man, you need to live in the past, the present, and the future—”

“I’m already living in the past!” Nico motioned at their surroundings.

“Don’t interrupt your elders. As I was saying, young man, you need to live in the past, the present, and the future. The spirits of all three shall strive within you. Do not shut out the lessons that they teach.”

Nico rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “And honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year?” At this point, he was ready to crash into the sycamores, just to get the dream over and done with.

“Well, yes,” said Scrooge with surprise. “I couldn’t have said it better myself. Although maybe not honor Christmas food all year. I put on a stone from Martha Cratchit’s figgy pudding alone. Now, what’s this about making a new friend?”

“It’s nothing. I’m helping Eli out. That doesn’t mean we’re friends or anything. I would help anyone who really needed it. Besides, we

barely know each other. I'd be better off dropping him in St. Louis and wiping my hands of it all."

"But would you really?" asked Scrooge. "Is the solitude really worth it?"

Nico opened his mouth to answer, but hesitated. Even though he and Eli had barely talked, there was something comforting about having someone next to him on the road, especially someone who wasn't a god or a Dickensian moneylender. Before he could say anything, Zeus pointed ahead to the inevitable ice slick.

"Time to slow down," he said, vanishing from the car.

Nico nodded, but his feet didn't listen, pressing down on the gas pedal as the speedometer jumped and spluttered. He glanced at the rearview mirror only to see Scrooge disappear as the car hit the sycamore tree with a mighty crack—

\* \* \*

Nico inhaled deeply when he awoke. The air had lost the thick, wet blanket feel of August weather, having been cleansed and refreshed by additional rainfall through the night. Autumn was still a month away, but every once in a while, he caught a crispness in the air that heralded the change of seasons. By the time he was back home from this trip, the Midwestern woods would already be dressed in crunchy, crimson hues.

Another scent wove its way through the pine needle freshness, something mouthwatering and delicious. He grasped the canvas of

the tent and rolled about until he was in a standing position, grunting with the effort. He ducked out of the tent, blinking at the sunlight glinting off a silver frying pan.

“Is that bacon?” he asked, a hand shielding his eyes from the glare as his stomach growled as if it too was just waking up.

“Turkey bacon, but yes,” said Eli, grinning over a newly-stoked fire, holding on to one of the pans that Lettie had given Nico for the trip. “Told you I could cook.” He dished out a paper plate of eggs and bacon, and even tossed him some salt and pepper packets.

Nico took a seat in an empty camp chair. They ate in comfortable silence, or rather, Nico did. Eli just swirled his eggs around the plate nervously, his leg twitching faster and faster until Nico put down his own plate and glared at him.

“So, um, about last night?” Eli finally said, ducking from Nico’s stern expression. “Did I get you in trouble with your brother? I didn’t mean to, and he looked really suspicious.”

Nico scoffed at the idea. “I’m the oldest. No one gets me in trouble. But everyone in my family is gonna know now.” Eli’s gaze dropped to the ground, and Nico cursed inwardly. “Not that there’s anything wrong with anything! It’s just going to be a thing. You know how families are.”

Something flashed onto Eli’s face at that last sentence, but it disappeared just as quickly. “I’m sorry. Your grandparents and sister wouldn’t have said something to the others?”

“Ariana is the last one of us to think about gossiping. She’ll tease you senselessly, but she’ll do it straight to your face. And my grandparents will only bring it up to prove a point.” He mimicked his

grandmother's throaty Italian accent. "Restaurants these days, they don't know how to make a good bellini. Why, poor Eli had to visit the restroom after half a glass! Who's Eli, you ask?" He then spouted something in Italian with plenty of overdramatic hand waves.

"Oh." Eli's frown was filled with both remorse and confusion. "I'm sorry that I've caused you trouble, then."

"Trust me, you've caused yourself more trouble than me." Nico winced. "That didn't come out nice either. I'm just saying, you might have had more fun just getting on a plane than coming along with me."

Eli's lost puppy look returned, and again, Nico chastised himself. He usually wasn't this bad with conversations. What other skills had he lost since that damn car accident? "Of course, I wouldn't have gotten bacon and eggs for breakfast." He shoved another forkful into his mouth before he could say anything else and groaned at the divine taste of such a simple meal. He looked up at Eli in gratitude—and his throat tightened.

*Not now, not now*, he thought. *I want these bacon and eggs. These bacon and eggs are normal.* He repeated it in his head like a frantic prayer. *I want these bacon and eggs.* But that anxious, illogical part of his brain had struck again, constricting his throat and chest until swallowing became an Olympic challenge. His stomach knotted as he forced the mouthful down and sat the plate in his lap.

"So, uh, next place I had planned, I've got reservations at a hotel in Cuba, Missouri." His voice was tremulous, and if he didn't get it together soon, this would all go upside-down. He rushed onward. "I

was planning on spending a few days there, working, and then going out and doing local touristy things.”

Eli sent him a thoughtful look, and Nico wondered if he was about to call out Nico’s odd behavior. Instead, he asked, “Where’s Cuba?”

Nico smiled, but it was a raw and uneasy attempt. “South of Florida?”

Eli groaned. “You know what I mean.”

“Cuba, *Missouri* is southwest of St. Louis.”

“Oh.” Eli’s face went blank, but his shoulders drew in slightly.

“Anyway, the room I got has two beds.” Nico cleared his throat. The nervous contraction was loosening, but his belly still roiled. “And, uh, you make good bacon. If you want.”

Eli scuffed at the ground with his foot until ash from the fire left a streak on his new sneakers. “Um, what about you leaving me in St. Louis?”

He looked pathetic. Of course, Nico didn’t pity him. Pity didn’t do anyone any good. He could attest to that. However, he needed that look to leave Eli’s face and never return, and that in itself was an alarming instinct. “I mean, I guess I can get bacon in St. Louis, but it might not be as good as yours. What if we extended the trial to Tulsa instead?”

“I’d be okay with that.” Eli lifted his head, eyes round. “For the bacon trial, of course.”

“Then we agree.” Nico lifted his fork in a toast. “To Tulsa.”

“And to good bacon.” Eli clinked his fork against Nico’s and grinned impishly.



Nico grinned back and took a deep, calming breath. Looking down at his dish, he was surprised to see that somehow in the past few minutes, he had cleared a quarter of his plate.

# Chapter 8

*Ting. Ting. Thwack. Whoosh.*

Nico had heard of people's sanity snapping instantly, like a strand of uncooked spaghetti, but never thought it would happen to him. And yet here he was, seconds away from going full Tasmanian Devil simply because of a simple ball of tin foil.

*Ting. Ting. Bonk. Whoosh.*

While Nico had spent the morning indexing his notes on Sir Walter Scott, Eli had been out jogging. He had returned drenched in sweat, his face ruddy with exertion, and if Nico had stared a little more than he should have, it was probably because he was worried about whether or not Eli had stayed adequately hydrated.

Their hotel on the outskirts of Cuba, Missouri, was dated by its painted paneling, scuffed wood floors, and two of those vibrating beds that mimicked an exorcism rather than a massage. But the room was clean, the attached diner had decent coffee, and most importantly, the air conditioning worked. However, none of that could curb the beast that was Eli's attention span.

Freshly showered and redressed, Eli somehow still had the energy of a baby bobcat. At the moment, he was focusing his efforts on increasingly complex ways to shoot a crumpled tin foil ball into

the hotel room trash basket. Through trial and error, countless air balls, and a lazy layup that nearly took out a mirror, Eli had completely broken Nico's concentration.

The only reason Nico hadn't said anything to stop him yet was the look on Eli's face every time he lined up a shot. He furrowed his eyebrows, squinted his eyes, and stuck his tongue out like a studious Pomeranian while he fixated on the shot. It was...well, it was adorable.

*No, not adorable!* Nico shook the thought away. This man was annoying, talked more than a drunken macaw, and stormed through all of Nico's carefully laid plans like a wild tornado. He was certainly not adorable. Still, as he glanced over at Eli, he had to bite his lip to keep a smile from forming.

Until Eli's shot pinged off a lampshade, hit the dated digital alarm clock, bounced off the Gideon's Bible, and smacked Nico on the chin.

"Sorry," mouthed Eli, wringing his now empty hands.

Nico gave him a stern look, snatched up the ball, and aimed through the open bathroom door, sending it splashing to its final destination in the toilet. "Knock it off."

"Sorry! I don't sit still well."

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Nico picked up his pen and notebook, but instead of continuing his notes, he doodled aimlessly at the top. "Isn't there something in the area you want to do? We're here for two more days; you can explore anywhere you want." He grimaced. "Within reason. I'm not bailing you out of jail."

Chastened, Eli started flipping through the faded binder of local attractions provided by the motel. “This looks interesting,” he said, his enthusiasm ramping back to his DEFCON 1 level of sunshine. “The Meramec Caverns. ‘Come see Jesse James’s hideout.’ Is he on your list of legends and superstars?”

“Yeah, he’s in the—” Nico glanced at the pile of notebooks scattered on the bedspread. “The red notebook, I think. ‘The Ballad of Jesse James.’ It’s an old folk song.”

“There you go. One more for Ballad Bingo.”

“There’s also the Cher song.”

“Even better. You haven’t truly reached legend status until you’re in a Cher song. Do you want to come along? It would be good research.”

Nico hesitated and shook his head, tapping the side of his knee. “I don’t think exploring caverns is anywhere in my future.” He averted his eyes back down to the notebook, not wanting to see any pity in Eli’s eyes.

“Then I’ll wait for you,” said Eli, lifting a shoulder.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean, if we can’t stay caught up with the tour group, then we just go a little slower together. We’d have our own fun.”

Nico ignored the sharp twist in his chest at the word *we*, as if his decreased mobility was something they were choosing together, like curtains or matching sweaters. “So you’re suggesting that we go through an underground cavern system, by ourselves, away from our tour guide, while I limp after you?” He curled his mouth into a

sardonic smile. “This is exactly how horror movies start. Next thing you know, you’ll be sawing off my arm and eating it.”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” said Eli, rolling his eyes. “I’m sure there’s something we can do to see the caverns.”

He was probably right. Still, Nico didn’t want to see the looks of the other tourists as he—and Eli, who was “ride or die” with him on this for some bizarre reason—struggled to keep up. Or worse, when he was in their way, and they had to either wait for him or go around him, huffing impatiently with inconsiderate glares.

“I’ve got too much to do,” Nico lied. “Go on without me. Either you’ll have fun and keep yourself busy, or you’ll get lost, and the room will be quiet tonight. Both are positive outcomes for me.”

Eli expelled a dramatic, self-suffering sigh. “Fine, Mr. Grumpy Bear, I’m off on an adventure.” He slid on his shoes, gave a mock salute, and disappeared through the door.

Nico blew out a breath, and a peculiar malaise spread through his body as the room’s silence enveloped him. It was quiet, peaceful, and, damn it, perfect working conditions.

Except now he felt a little like Cinderella pining to go to the ball, but in this case, the godmother had come, offered him a way to experience it, and he had declined a good opportunity all because of his stubborn pride.

Nico squared his shoulders against the particle wood backboard and reached for his pen and notebook again. His eyes caught on the meandering doodles he had left in the top margin, and he groaned, throwing his head back against the mountain of pillows bracing him up. Nico ripped the page out of his notebook, crumpling it into a ball

until he could no longer see where he had subconsciously written Eli's name over and over across the top. He flung the paper ball at the television, where it bounced off the screen, off the wall, and into the trash basket.

*Ting. Thwack. Whoosh.*

\* \* \*

It was close to supertime when Nico's phone vibrated with a new message. He rubbed at his dry eyes and put his laptop aside, opening the text. It was from Eli, but it was just a link to a video clip. He pushed the play button and was greeted with dark shadows, flickering orange lights, and lots and lots and lots of rocks.

He swallowed around what felt like yet another rock in his throat. He hadn't gone to the caverns, so Eli had sent the caverns to him. He was several feet behind the tour group, just as he said he would be, but he murmured his own narration into the phone.

"Now, you see right there," Eli's narration began, "that's where Jesse James hid some of his loot. He should have just invested in Bitcoin or whatever the kids are doing these days, but whatever."

Definitely his own narration.

"Over here, you can see this rock formation that looks incredibly like Patrick Dempsey's bicep. They call it the McDreamy Formation. And over here, we've got a grouping of stalagmites that looks exactly like the first Taco Bell in Nebraska. Those glittering pebbles down

there represent the mild sauce packets that tragically spilled on opening day.”

Nico couldn't help it. He burst into laughter, big snorty guffaws that weren't the least bit dignified, but felt so damn good.

“Originally, the caves were used for mining saltpeter. This practice ended abruptly when they found out they needed to salt Peter to pay Paul.”

Nico groaned even as the laughter bubbled out of him. He hunched over the phone, completely enraptured and wiping his eyes as Eli introduced him to the Theater Room cave. The irritated tour guide promptly shushed him as he tested the acoustics by mimicking—very badly—the trademark THX sound. The video finally ended when Eli got into a snarky argument with the guide about a grouping of stalactites that he named “Henry VIII's Junk.” Several other tourists started to laugh, and Eli attempted to prove his assertion by pointing out that the phallic rock was dripping limestone and misogyny. The video went black after the tour guide gestured to the glowing exit sign.

Nico's belly ached from laughter and a little bit of regret. He should have gone. He would have been fine, and Eli would have stayed with him, just like he'd said. It would have been fun. He would probably have been banned from the Meramec Caverns for life, but still...fun.

The door rattled as Eli's key turned—actually *turned*, because the motel was too old school for electronic keycards—and Nico looked up with a grin composed of a dopamine high and maybe a little bit of

anticipatory affection. His smile fell immediately. Tension lined Eli's face, and his eyes were shadowed in purple fatigue.

"Hey, you alright?" asked Nico.

Eli's lips clamped shut, and he held up a shaky finger. He gingerly positioned two bags of takeout food on the table and bolted for the bathroom. The door slammed shut, followed by the sound of retching.

Nico waited until he heard the toilet flush and the sink run, but when Eli didn't emerge, he rapped his fingers against the wood. "Eli?"

"Uh-huh?" slurred Eli through the door.

Nico opened it, stripes of light spilling into the dim room, revealing Eli hunched by the toilet. "How can I help?"

"Migraine," he murmured, cheek squished against the ceramic bowl as if it were his only friend. "Started on the way home. Need dark. I'll go lie in the van."

"Sure." Nico wouldn't let that happen, but he didn't want to argue and worsen the pain. Closing the door as Eli vomited again, Nico switched off most of the bedroom's lamps. He rifled through Eli's bag until he found his wrinkled sleep shirt and pants.

The distressed noises from the bathroom ceased, and Nico opened the door again, passing him the crumpled clothes. "You okay?"

Eli nodded. He was slumped against the bathroom wall, but the frantic strain was gone from his shoulders. "Vomiting usually helps. I always keep a few migraine meds in my wallet for emergencies. I'll take one when I know I can keep it down." Nico reached out a hand



to help him up. Eli paused, steadying himself on his arm, his fingers shaking. He glanced up at Nico. “The meds make me a little foggy. Less articulate and more Keith Richards.”

“I’ll record anything bizarre you say. As thanks for the cavern video.”

Eli managed a weak smile. “Liked that, did you?”

“I’ll never look at a stalagmite the same.”

Nico helped him into his pajamas and found the pill in his wallet. He traced a finger over the familiar red A before setting the wallet aside and guiding Eli to the nearest bed. The sheets were flimsy and scratchy, but Eli sighed as if they were homespun from butterfly silk. He hid his face in the darkened crevasse between two pillows. Nico covered him back up and then stood awkwardly. “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” The pillows muffled Eli’s voice. “We were at cannon fire and mortar flashes level. Now it’s just thunder and lightning in my head.”

“Sounds loud. And painful. And a little like the Napoleonic Wars.”

Nico made a quick, possibly regrettable decision, and lay on the other side of the bed, plumping a pillow against the headboard and swinging his leg onto the mattress. He studied the taut line of Eli’s back and then ran his fingers through the burnt honey-colored hair. Eli startled, and Nico snatched his hand back.

“What are you doing?” Eli mumbled.

“Um...being helpful?”

“Always so fucking helpful.” He swung his hand around until he found Nico’s fingers and placed them back onto his neck. Nico

stroked, alternating the pressure and speed until the tight muscles slackened. “Oh, thank you, thank you,” Eli sighed, still facedown in the pillows. “My mother used to do that. Always helped.”

For several minutes, Nico relished the silence and Eli’s silky hair against his fingertips, and how oddly right the entire tableau felt. Maybe he had been staying away from people too long if he was getting this much pleasure from petting his pseudo-roommate like a supervillain’s Persian cat.

“My mom used to read to me too,” said Eli. His voice had the dreamy, breathy quality of someone who had pain relief at last. “I miss that. She’d read whatever she had on hand. She chased many migraines away with a good helping of *Vogue* or *Good Housekeeping*.”

It wasn’t a request, just a moment of bittersweet recollection, but this was something Nico could manage. He cleared his throat and began to recite.

“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,  
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—  
While I nodded, nearly napping—”

“Nearly napping...” Eli, who was nearly napping himself, hummed in approval. “‘The Raven.’ I’ve always liked that one.”

“You’d love my back then.”

Eli paused. “Is this your version of flirting? Because if so, I’d really like to table this conversation until I have the brainpower to flirt back.”

“I meant, I have a tattoo of the raven across my back. Shoulder blade to shoulder blade.” Nico tapped on each of Eli’s shoulders in

succession.

“Show me later. Keep reading. Please.”

Nico continued, closing his eyes and resting his head against the backboard as the words flowed from memory to mouth, words about the lost Lenore, balm in Gilead, and nevermore, nevermore, nevermore. Eli’s body relaxed under his vocal and physical ministrations, drifting away from the migraine’s attack.

When Nico started “Paul Revere’s Ride,” Eli twisted his body to watch blearily, but a frown replaced his placid expression. “Where’s the book?”

“What book?”

“Aren’t you reading from a book?” Eli patted Nico’s hands and lap, even lifting the quilted coverlet to peek underneath.

“Oh, um, no.” Nico scratched at his hairline. “Between my love for narrative poetry and the many, *many* times I’ve taught the subject, there’s a whole library of poems stuck in my head.”

Eli stared at him with something like wonder. “Reads poetry and has a bird on his back. Careful, you could turn a boy’s head.”

Nico’s cheeks heated, but he dove back into his recitations. Somewhere between “Casey at the Bat” and “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” Eli fell asleep.

# Chapter 9

Waking up was Eli's favorite part of the day. The slurred twilight of his mind where worries were forbidden held everything precious to him, and today was no different. As long as his eyes were closed while his other senses woke like unfurling flowers, everything was as it should be.

He heard his mother laughing in the kitchen, clear as the glass in the little window of his bedroom where he spent hours watching the low-angst activity of the neighborhood. A door opened and closed again—she must be in the pantry, fussing with the dry goods. He inhaled slowly, waiting for the scent of coffee and lightly burnt toast. It wasn't there.

Another inhale, an urgent one this time. The air was musty, with a hint of cleaning chemicals. An air conditioner hummed in Eli's ear, and his peaceful reverie ended with the usual heavy pressure deep in his chest. He hadn't had air conditioning in his room in that small house. He opened his eyes and was met with the off-white popcorn topography of a motel room ceiling.

Waking up was also Eli's least favorite part of the day.

He heard the laughter again, but it was only another motel guest walking past their room, a rolling suitcase whirring and bumping on

the concrete pathway.

He flipped over to his other side, tangling the thin white sheet around his shoulders. In the other bed, Nico was still asleep. For all of his height, he still somehow managed to look like a burrowed woodland creature nestled in the bedspread, his foot dangling in rebellion off the edge of the mattress.

He was still stunned that the tall, snoring guy before him had taken care of him last night in such a tender way. Nico liked to help others—for all his grumbling, he had picked up a perfect stranger and was driving him across America—but yesterday's actions were beyond anything he could have imagined. Nico had treated him like someone who had been his friend for years, not just a few days. Eli yearned for a time when knowing who wanted him around was as black and white as it used to be.

Not only that, but the poetry recitation had been both awesome and very entertaining. Maybe Eli would ask Nico to read *Fox in Socks* later, just to see how he'd respond. He stifled a snort at the thought of that deep, crisp voice murmuring about tweetle beetles.

For now, though, he would let Nico rest, as Nico had allowed him last night. Eli fumbled out of bed and toward the bathroom, changing into the cheap pair of running shorts and shoes. They may not have been necessities to some people, but he needed a run to get through the day. He scribbled a note for Nico and headed out the door, ready to tire himself out until he no longer remembered that slip of time between dreaming and wakefulness.

When Eli returned an hour later, sweaty and with a new understanding of Missouri's humidity, Nico was already dressed and

writing in one of his notebooks, the scritch-scratch of his pen the only sound in the room. A rainbow of notebooks and sticky notes spread from the bedside table and across the coverlet. Nico glanced up from the notebook, caught sight of Eli, and dropped his pen. He tried to grab it, but smacked it under the bed in his clumsiness.

Well, *that* was an interesting reaction. Maybe Nico was easily startled?

“Good run?” asked Nico, his face twisted in a grimace as he stretched his arm for the pen.

Eli nodded, kneeling beside the bed and reaching for the pen. He handed it to Nico, who averted his gaze at the action.

“Thanks,” he mumbled. “By the way, what pharmacy is your prescription at?”

“What?”

“Your migraine prescription. We used the last pill last night.”

Eli blinked at Nico, momentarily baffled. *We*. He had used the word *we*. Eli had been so cautious about using it to maintain the balance that Nico was being kind and doing a stranger a favor, yet Nico so casually threw it out. *We*. As if they were partners on this crazy road trip. Maybe even companions.

“We did?” His tongue felt thick with confusion.

“Yes.” Nico raised an eyebrow. “Which pharmacy?”

“Um.” Eli mentally shook himself. “Walgreens.”

Nico glanced at the unused pillow to his right, covered in neat lines of sticky notes. “There we go.” He plucked one from the fabric and handed it over to Eli.

Eli didn't take it. He couldn't think of anything to say, which was a rare event.

"This is the address and phone number," Nico said. He lifted an eyebrow. "Call it in, and we can pick it up later."

Eli took it, and the paper immediately began to lose its crispness in Eli's sweaty hand. "Did you write down the number and address of every pharmacy in town?"

Nico immediately picked up the pen and started writing in his notebook. "It seemed easier."

It did not seem easier at all. Eli's heart stuttered as he opened his mouth to point this out, but instead, he just said, "Thanks."

Nico nodded, never looking up from his notebook, and a flush crept over his angled cheekbones that probably matched Eli's exercise-induced ruddiness.

They had to get back to their grumpy banter, stat.

"You know," Eli said, "most people just use their phone to keep notes instead of..." He gestured at the plethora of Post-its.

Nico scowled, but the crease in his forehead disappeared. "It's much faster to pick up a piece of paper and write it down than it is to open my phone, find the app, open the app, and then type long words like 'onomatopoeia' while fighting autocorrect on a keyboard meant for mice, not hands like these." He flourished his right hand with disdain, but Eli's gaze immediately locked on those long fingers, fingers that could perform so many extraordinary actions and—

"Whatever you say, grandpa," he choked out, and before Nico could respond, Eli dashed to the shower and locked the door to ward away any further treacherous thoughts.

\* \* \*

Eli had never considered being a parent, nor was he someone who acted fatherly as part of his nature. He loved children, but he loved them because they were like him—fast runners, a little out of control, and occasionally, really good at Legos.

Tonight, though, he was as close to being a parental figure as he ever would be. Waiting in a gravel parking lot, inside a van where the radio only seemed to play Michael Bolton on rotation, with a bag of groceries at his side, he just needed a fanny pack and a copy of *Reader's Digest* to become his mother.

Of course, the fact that he was sitting outside a dive bar and not a high school soccer field altered the comparison.

Nico had wanted to go to a bar after his long day of reading and researching. Eli had never been one for bars, and they needed some supplies, so he had dropped Nico off at a bar called Marlon's and taken Esmeralda to find the nearest grocery store.

The groceries were non-perishable, so he placed them in the back and locked up Esmeralda to fetch Nico.

It was easy to spot the bigger man once he was inside. The place was crowded but not overly so, and Nico's wild hair and beard made him stand out as he sat at the bar, although he had tried to tame it in the tiny bathroom mirror with some of Eli's precious hair gel. Nico was still very handsome despite his *Castaway*-chic fashion, as proven by the sly smile he granted to a cute blonde woman with thin



silver glasses. In return, she was leaning toward him, her hair dusting his shoulder and her eyes lowered in a flirtatious glance. It was a very typical social scene, and Eli would have turned around and gone back to the van, letting things go where they would. But when he looked beyond the woman's come-hither gaze and Nico's reciprocal smolder, he saw the green pallor splashed across his skin. Eli's thought that he might be drunk was dashed when he saw Nico's hands shaking, even pressed against his thighs.

Nico was terrified, and for the life of him, Eli couldn't figure out why. But what he could do, what he was highly talented at and had plenty of experience with, was make a complete ass out of himself.

So Eli went for it. He moseyed up to the bar next to Nico, swung his leg over the wobbly stool, and said, "Hello, sailor. Buy me a drink?"

Nico groaned without looking toward Eli and took a long sip of his whiskey. He raised his eyes skyward. "Dear Lord, tell me this is an alcohol hallucination."

"Just me, cupcake," said Eli, clapping Nico on the shoulder. "Just me." Nico mouthed 'he called me cupcake' to whatever deity he spoke to via the ceiling.

"You two know each other?" asked the woman on Nico's left, studying the two of them. She was attractive, with fantastic blonde hair and a mischievous look. Eli might have gone for her if he weren't reeling from a broken engagement, and if Nico hadn't claimed her first. Still, he recognized the look on Nico's face—Nico was uncomfortable, and that outweighed someone with good hair any day.

He slung an arm around Nico's neck, pulling him back against his chest in a possessive embrace. Instantly, he realized it was a bad decision. He'd done many reckless things in his life, but touching Nico in such an intimate manner was easily in the top three. It felt... well, it felt *good*. There was no need for fancy words or frivolous poetry. Touching Nico felt good. Touching Nico felt right.

Eli inhaled in shock—another mistake. Nico smelled like coconut. Fucking *coconut*, of all things, like his hair should be covered in slurried pineapple and rum. Eli internally smacked himself because that was not something someone should ever think about another human being.

"Yeah, we know each other," said Eli, tiptoeing two fingers up Nico's arm before booping him on the nose. "We're in a committed relationship."

"You are?" asked Blondie.

"We are?" asked Nico in a husky growl.

"Of course!" said Eli. "We're on a romantic road trip." He took a deep breath, then leaned over and kissed Nico on the jawline, taken aback at how natural of an act it seemed. Nico stilled, his eyes widening.

"Really?" Blondie's eyes flicked back and forth between them, and she pursed her lips, fighting a smile.

"Yes," said Eli just as Nico muttered, "No."

"Well, you two are...something else. Adorable, maybe. I think I'm just going to—" Blondie didn't even finish, giving an awkward two-finger wave and walking away.

Nico scrubbed at his face and turned to Eli, annoyance flooding his expression, but his shoulders fell back with released tension. “I didn’t need to be rescued.”

“Hmmm.” Eli tried to sound noncommittal, but he was too busy tamping down the urge to kiss Nico’s jawline again, and maybe nuzzle it. Just platonic nuzzling, of course. Someone needed to make platonic nuzzling socially acceptable ASAP.

“Fine, let’s go.” Nico threw some money on the counter and stalked toward the door.

\* \* \*

“What were you scared of in there?” Eli asked once they were on the way back to the motel.

Nico’s body stiffened, and he turned his gaze to the open passenger side window. The breeze was humid and carried the sound of late summer crickets. “Nothing,” he lied.

“Really? When a beautiful woman approaches you, does your skin naturally turn that attractive gray color?”

“No...not usually.” Nico cleared his throat again, searching desperately for a new topic, but they had all fled his brain. His shoulders slumped. “I don’t know if I can still do...it. Anymore.”

“It?”

“You know.” Nico sighed. He lowered his voice as if he were about to impart a great secret. “Sex.”

“Oh.” Eli’s goofy expression fell away, and his forehead furrowed. “Is your penis still functional?”

Nico choked, making a noise somewhat like a wounded buffalo. He didn’t answer as they pulled into their parking spot outside their room. When Eli turned the ignition off, he spun the keyring on his index finger expectantly.

“Yes, it’s functional,” Nico said, the words rushing out like floodwaters. “I had issues for a while after the accident. Not that I was with anyone, but I knew it wasn’t working correctly.” His face felt hot enough to cook some of Eli’s turkey bacon.

Eli nodded. “That makes sense. Nerve damage and all that.” He exited the car and followed Nico into the motel room that had taken on a familiar, home-like atmosphere after two days and nights. He took off his shoes, tossing them in the corner, where they landed helter-skelter, and Nico followed suit.

“Alright then.” Eli clapped his hands like a schoolteacher attempting to get his class’s attention. “On the bed.”

Nico froze. “I’m sorry, what?”

Eli gestured. “Get on the bed. Please.”

“What is even happening right now?”

“You said you were worried. So get on the bed.”

Nico didn’t move, fixing Eli with a wary glare.

Eli sighed, glancing at his fingers as he wrung them together. “My mom’s dead,” he said after a few seconds.

Nico blinked as the conversation spun in a squealing hairpin turn. A streak of despair sliced Eli’s face into a portrait of grief, so Nico mumbled out, “That sucks.”

Eli stared at him so long that Nico shifted on his feet under the scrutiny. “Thank you,” Eli finally said. “People always say that they’re sorry when somebody dies, and it makes no sense. Why be sorry? They didn’t kill her. But saying it sucks hits it on the nail. It absolutely sucks. Thank you.”

Outside, motel guests murmured in low voices. The ice machine rattled. Eli was being quiet—and he was never quiet. Whatever he was about to say had to be important.

“She was sick for a year and a half—uterine cancer. Everything was so simple then. My life was a little bit of work, a little bit of Audrey, and the rest was taking care of Mom.”

Eli took the television remote from the dresser, fiddling with it absentmindedly. He ran his slender fingers back and forth against the buttons. “You know, people always talk about how they want to die with dignity. But there’s nothing dignified about the act of dying, not how we define dignity. Her hair fell out. The chemo made her skin puffy, like she was wearing a mask of herself that didn’t fit right.”

He shook his head. “They never get that right in the movies. There was lots of blood, lots of vomit, catheters, and anything else you could think of. And it wasn’t just the physical stuff. The meds would mess with her head, and she’d say things that weren’t really her. One day she reamed me out for not going to college when she’d been okay with it before.

“So at the garage, we had this customer. Mr. Leonard. He was the stereotypical old California hippie. He had this ancient Buick the size of an orca that he just worshipped, but he was in every few months with another breakdown. I kept telling him that maybe it was

time for a new car, but he talked me out of it every time. Then one day, he came in, right after my mom had had an awful morning. And I was so angry, and I snapped and told him to just get a new fucking car. I stormed off, and he followed me back into the bay. Which, uh, you should not let customers do, for insurance reasons.” Eli sent Nico a stern look, and he barked out a laugh.

“Mr. Leonard opened up the hood of that stupid Buick, pointed inside, and said, ‘that’s a fan belt.’ I said, ‘Yes, I know that.’ And he said, ‘It’s not working.’ And I said, ‘Yes, Mr. Leonard, that’s why you’re here. At a garage.’ And he said, ‘It needs to be either fixed or replaced.’

And I think at that point, I just made a weird growly bear noise, so he kept talking. ‘It’s not the fault of the entire car,’ he said. ‘This whole car is a miracle of technology with dozens and dozens of little miracles doing their thing inside. You have to look at it piece by piece and accept what can and can’t be done. The fan belt needs to drive the fan motor. It has cracks, so it isn’t doing that. Either we fix the belt, which we can’t, or we replace it, which we can. That’s all there is to it. So what will it be?’”

“You replaced it,” said Nico.

“I replaced it,” Eli said. “And the car went on to live another day. But his talk of all these little miracles in the car made me think of my mother’s body, and I accepted that chasing after some idealistic view of living and dying with dignity was doing nothing but making things worse. We had to look at it piece by piece and accept what could and could not be done. Every little piece of her—of every human body—was a miracle and could be explained as such, even when

malfunctioning. So she and I started treating her hospital visits and every issue, like a visit to the garage. When her hair fell out, the choices were to buy a wig or not wear a wig. It had nothing to do with dignity and everything to do with her body reacting to a stimulus. She made a choice—no wig—and it was on to the next issue. Instead of panicking every time she vomited, we looked at that particular instance, looked at what could and could not be done, and figured out solutions just for that issue. There was no more talk of dignity. There were just reactions, problems identified, and solutions created.”

He crossed his arms, and there was a flash of anger in his expression for the first time that night. “So you can sit there and mope about what you can and can’t do, or you can shut your mouth, realize your body is a damn miracle that just needs some creative solutions, and lay down on the goddamned bed.”

Nico laid down on the goddamned bed.

“How’s that?” Eli asked in a self-satisfied tone.

“It’s okay,” Nico said, his voice shaking. “I can’t let my bad leg hang over the side; that’s too much weight dragging it down. But I can lay here like this just fine.”

“Good.” Eli nodded, pacing around the bed and studying his body from every angle.

Nico felt like one of Eli’s cars up on the lift, everything open and bared. “But this position isn’t everybody’s thing.”

Eli laughed a mirthless laugh. “You’d be surprised what people like and don’t like.” He squinted at Nico. “I think doggie style is out of your repertoire for a while.”

“Oh dear God.” Nico’s cheeks flushed.

Eli winked and laid down flat on his back next to Nico on the cheap bed. “Alright, lay over me.”

Nico froze. “You can’t be serious.”

“Just try it.” Eli tugged at Nico’s shirt. “Come on.”

Nico stared at him, but he had a terrifying, no-nonsense look that was impossible to disobey. With a surprising amount of effort that would cause some sore muscles in the morning, Nico managed to flop over Eli’s prone body. For a moment, they simply lay there as Nico tried to think of anything other than how their pelvises should line up. But, of course, they lined up just perfectly. Eli’s chest was solid and warm, a stark contrast to the overworked air conditioning unit.

“How’s this?” Eli finally murmured. He had a tiny hitch in his voice. “Are you in any pain?”

“N-not really,” stammered Nico, but Eli lifted a skeptical eyebrow. “I’ll need a pillow,” he amended.

Eli hooked a hand above his head, feeling around for a pillow. Nico gritted his teeth and lifted his stiff leg, allowing the other man to work the pillow under his left thigh.

“Better?”

Nico swallowed. “Yes.” *Dear God, yes, this is better than anything ever.*

“Well, there you go.” Eli huffed out a laugh that Nico felt in his chest. “Now you can be confident that you can successfully sex up anyone you bring back to the room.” He scrunched up his mouth. “Wait a sec, if they were coming back to the room, what would you



do with me? Hide me in the bathroom? Turn on the fan, so I don't hear anything?"

Nico snorted and laughed, his forehead falling to Eli's shoulder. Eli smelled like clean sweat, sandalwood aftershave, and chocolate syrup from that ridiculous cookies n'cream n'coffee milkshake he had insisted on trying and ended up just spilling on his T-shirt. "Best scenario, we would have gone back to their place. Worst case, there's always Esmeralda."

"Everyone wants to be loved up in the back of a stoner van," Eli said. "You could always hang a sock on the antenna to keep people out."

"If the van's a-rockin'..." began Nico, and Eli let out a snuffling chuckle that grew into hysterical laughter for both of them. A tension deep in Nico's belly, tension six months in the making, released like the latch of a long-locked door. Their position no longer felt suggestive but peaceful. It was an awkward but comforting embrace for something they had both lost and now mourned and celebrated in tandem.

When their laughter subsided, Nico reluctantly rolled off Eli, but only enough to still face him on the bed. A strand of hair that had fought its way out of the prison of styling gel fell limply over one of Eli's eyebrows. Nico wanted to brush it away, but refrained as Eli blew the hair from his face.

"Eli?"

"Yeah?" Eli responded in a low whisper.

"Whatever happened to Mr. Leonard and his car?"

Eli smiled, but it wasn't a remnant of their earlier mirth. It was sad, and his eyes took on a misty, longing look. "He brought in his new car the week after my mom died. When I saw it, I sat right down on the bay floor and cried." He sat up, brushed his crumpled shirt back into place, and headed to the bathroom, latching the door and leaving Nico alone on the goddamned bed.

# Chapter 10

“Alright,” said Eli, his gaze trailing upward. “What exactly am I looking at?”

“This,” said Nico, his hands raised in a flourish, “is the Blue Whale of Catoosa.”

“I can see that,” Eli said. “It’s definitely blue. It’s definitely a whale. And we are definitely in Catoosa.” The Oklahoma-based monstrosity they stood before was a hollowed metal and concrete recreation of the marine mammal. It was sky-blue, with an oversized lower jaw that invited visitors to walk inside its metallic maw. Circular windows trailed the upper half, which made it appear like it was either fashioned from an airplane, or the Mafia had taken a hit out on it.

“This zoologist guy made it for his wife who liked whales,” said Nico. “I think it’s kind of romantic.” He blushed, and an erratic zing hit Eli right in the chest.

“*You* think something is romantic?” said Eli, ignoring his rapid heartbeat.

“I occasionally have sentiment in my heart,” drawled Nico. “And don’t forget I’m a literature professor. We find everything sentimental and romantic, even when it’s not.”

“Fine,” said Eli. “Let’s go into the belly of the beast.” He grasped the cooler he had filled this morning at a convenience store with peanut butter sandwiches and a few apples. Of course, he had made Nico stop for their daily milkshake during their very, very short jaunt through Kansas.

Getting a milkshake daily had two primary purposes, though one was slightly dishonest. Eli did love milkshakes. They were his favorite, even if it was sending him on his way to lactose intolerance in his elder years. Route 66 had enough kitschy diners to provide Eli with enough milkshakes to swim in if he wanted, which he didn’t because, *ew, sticky*. Six days into their journey, it had become a tradition akin to collecting postcards. Their time in Cuba had introduced him to a tiramisu shake (delicious) and a Fruity Pebbles shake (somewhat tasty, but the texture was too gravelly). After a night in Springfield, Missouri—which had the same amount of corn as Springfield, Illinois, and Eli would hear nothing else—he had picked up a chocolate mint shake on the way to the Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Home and Museum. Eli would forever equate the taste of chocolate mint with the astonishment on Nico’s face when a little girl tugged at his shirt, stared at his unruly hair and beard, and asked if he was cosplaying Pa Ingalls.

But every time he picked one up for himself, he bought one small vanilla shake for Nico, which led to the second, dishonest purpose.

Nico didn’t eat much. Sometimes, he would take a few bites of whatever Eli cooked before putting the plate aside. Other times, he would push the food around the plate, making small talk but never taking a bite. It reminded Eli of how his mother would pick at her food

after chemotherapy, too nauseous to take a bite but too polite to make a fuss. He had learned to focus on small wins, and if she ate two spoonfuls of ice cream versus two spoonfuls of vegetables, at least it was two spoonfuls of something.

Eli took pictures of himself in each town, drinking his milkshake, and posted them on Instagram. Halfway through their stay in Cuba, Nico took a few sips of his vanilla milkshake and offered to take Eli's picture. The next day, Nico drank a little more while they posed in front of the sign to their hotel. If it took goofy pictures and dairy products to get Nico to put a little weight on, then Eli would gladly drink them until even he was sick of them.

His phone buzzed with a text from Audrey, and he lifted it for Nico to see.

*AUDREY: Tell me those aren't real grasshoppers in that shake on your Instagram*

*ELI: They are! It gives it an extra KICK*

"You two have made up fast," said Nico. His jaw tensed as he said it, probably from the cold drink.

"Hardly," said Eli, sipping his mint-flavored, insect-free shake as they stepped inside the whale. "We're just at the 'this might be a good thing, so let's text awkwardly like nothing has happened' phase."

"That sounds long and complicated." Nico paused. "How'd you meet her anyway?"

"Audrey was a customer at the garage while she was at USC. She came in with a Lexus of all things and told me it was the carburetor." He sighed at the memory. "And she was so gorgeous,

standing there with these blonde curls and this little red sundress, and I said...I said..."

Nico lifted an eyebrow. "Yes?"

"Carburetor? I barely know her!"

Nico choked on his milkshake. "Oh dear Lord."

Eli winced. "Yeah, not my best. She thought it was funny though. Next thing you know, we're together. And it was all wonderful." He stepped aside as a mother chased a giggling toddler past them. "And then it wasn't."

"Ah." Nico didn't prompt him to speak further, which somehow made Eli want to explain more.

"Once my mom got sick, suddenly I had to be the adult. Audrey took a back seat to everything else. When we were together, I was very attentive. She was my escape from everything. And maybe that's why we lasted through it all. Then Mom died, and suddenly, it was just Audrey and me. She had just graduated, and I was all alone and grieving, and it tipped the scales a bit. And then you add in her parents, and, well, you met them."

"I didn't meet them so much as observe them freaking out at your wedding."

"The wedding itself is symbolic of them enough. Not a thing out of place, everything exactly as it should be. Perfect. No mistakes." Eli patted his chest meaningfully. "Audrey talked me into moving to Indianapolis with her, but now there were rules. Little things, like I couldn't talk about my friends at the garage or mention that I was bi. She argued that I was marrying a woman anyway, so what did it

matter? But she had never cared about those things until we were around her parents.”

Nico’s mouth worked, his forehead creased. Carefully, he said, “It’s one thing to make that decision for yourself. When someone else makes it for you...that’s a big red flag.”

“You think?” Eli rolled his eyes.

“I know, I know!” Nico waved his hands in a placating gesture. “You were grieving! Hey, if it makes you feel better, you can come out to my mom next time she calls. It will be cathartic.”

“Oh yeah? Why your mom?”

“When I told her I was bi, she didn’t say anything. It was like I’d just been talking to her about the weather. When I pushed her on it, she shrugged and said, ‘Sexuality is fluid. Just ask your father.’” Nico grimaced. “And then he fucking winked at me.” He shuddered and continued as Eli burst into laughter. “So then what happened? You went from bisexual Californian mechanic to straight Indianan mechanic?”

“That’s what I thought was happening. I really *do* love working with cars, machinery, all of it. It’s like always having a puzzle to work on, and it’s never the same. Like our Esmeralda. Every bit of wear and tear has a story, known or unknown. Every repair is different. Although, she’s the first car I’ve potentially worked on that has a narwhal and unicorn wedding painted on the side.”

Nico hummed in agreement. “That’s our special girl.”

“Audrey’s father runs Moose Tractors, you know. So I thought I’d be working either in the factory, the garage, or some development area. I was excited about something like that. But he bought me a

suit and tie and put me in sales. I'm terrible at it." He paused. "Or, I guess, I was terrible at it. And little by little, they got me to hide who I was. The next thing I knew, I was attending church, talking business after business hours, and going to Colts games."

Nico clasped at his heart with feigned drama. "The horror."

"Imagine an entire stadium full of white, straight, Indianan salesmen. They turned me into the typical Colts fan." He shook his head ruefully. "After that, it just became a relationship where neither of us admitted everything was going wrong."

Nico tapped his chin. "Love chicken."

Eli wrinkled his nose. "Was that a term of endearment or is this an Indiana thing I missed out on?"

"No. It was like you were playing chicken, but with love."

"I'm still lost on the chicken part."

"You know, like when two tractors face-off and drive at each other until one of them chickens out and turns away."

Eli's jaw dropped. "What the fuck is wrong with Indiana?"

"I guess maybe the rest of the world does it with cars or something like that. Anyway, you were playing love chicken, neither of you backing down or surrendering."

"I suppose that's true. I really did love her. I don't anymore." Regret swept over his face, and he peered into his milkshake. "That makes me sad. I wish this milkshake had whiskey in it."

"I'm sure we can find someplace along the road with alcoholic milkshakes." Nico paused. "Do you think your love chicken was the reason you fainted?"



“That’s not a question I’ve been asked before.” Eli thought for a moment. “I think so. I think my body knew something was wrong, even if my brain was too stubborn to admit it.”

“Brains are stubborn things,” said Nico, and an indeterminable emotion flashed over his face. Then he tipped his head in the direction of the exit, and they left the giant whale’s stomach. Eli wasn’t sure if he had gotten everything he was supposed to get out of walking around in a concrete mammal, but at least he’d had the experience.

Eli squinted as they headed back into the sunlight, walking along the peaceful pond that served as home for the whale. “What about you? What heartbreak does the great Professor Meyer have in his backlog?”

Nico huffed a laugh. “None, really. I met a girl named Jenny in college. We both loved to read. We both loved to have sex.”

“Wow. You really are a romantic.” Picturing Nico with another person gave Eli a peculiar sinking feeling in his belly, like he’d swallowed a concrete whale instead of the other way around.

Nico bumped his shoulder with his own. “We got married between graduating from undergrad and going for our master’s. We lived with my grandparents for a lot of it, so you know she was a saint. Then, once we actually had the master’s degrees, we realized that the only things we had in common were books and sex.”

“That’ll do it.”

“We’re still friends. We still give each other books.” Nico shook his head. “Not sex, though.”

“That’s a shame. Did you like living with your grandparents?”

“I did. I know the cool thing would have been to live on campus, but after being the oldest in such a big family, it was nice to have that family connection, but in a quieter version. Well, as quiet as anyone in my family can be.”

“Is that why you speak Italian? Because you lived with them?”

“They only speak Italian at home, but yeah, that’s why. Their English is perfect, but I think it gives them a connection to their past and each other. It’s something that’s all theirs. Or it was, until I moved in and didn’t know much more than ‘Where is the bathroom?’ and ‘Are we out of cereal?’ in Italian.”

“How do you say those?” Eli was, of course, asking for purely educational reasons and not because he wanted to fan himself like a Southern belle every time Nico spoke Italian.

“*Dov’è il bagno? And...*” Nico looked pensive. “*A volte ti guardo e solo vorrei copirti di baci.*”

“Wow.” Eli had to control the shiver that wanted to rattle his bones. Italian must always sound that seductive. It couldn’t just be when Nico spoke it. “That’s very complicated-sounding.”

Nico shrugged, but there was a rosy tint to his cheekbones. “That’s just how Italian is.”

“Fair point,” said Eli.

The other man rubbed his chin, his eyes darting to Eli and away again.

“You okay?” asked Eli.

Nico lifted his shoulder again, stepping around a rock near the grassy embankment. “I was thinking, maybe we extend the trial period. I need more data.”

“Oh, really?” Eli folded his hands behind his back, trying to look nonchalant. “More data?”

Nico flushed. “Yes. Every good academic knows you need a large data sampling to be the most accurate.”

“Well, we can’t ruin the academic process.” Eli wanted to jig with happiness. Did he know how to jig? It couldn’t be that hard, right?

Nico blew out a breath. “How about Albuquerque? If you drive me crazy by then, we’ll put you on the next plane to LA.” His tone suggested he had already decided to keep Eli with him throughout the journey, but was trying to uphold his ridiculous rules.

“That sounds like enough time to get data.” Eli pressed his lips together.

Nico nodded and continued his careful walk around the pond. As soon as Nico turned his back, Eli fist-pumped the air and gave a celebratory, somewhat jiggling kick, not even regretting it when his foot slipped, and he plopped into the shallow water like a freshly caught fish. As Nico stared down at his prone body, shaking his head and fighting a grin, Eli laughed until his belly hurt, squinting against the sun’s rays as mirthful tears ran down his cheeks. When he opened his eyes again, he saw the Blue Whale of Catoosa behind Nico, its toothy grin outstretched wide to the world. Eli wondered if the creature was as happy as he was.

\* \* \*

Heavy rain and a ringing phone heralded their exit from Catoosa and the reliable Route 66 as they jumped onto the highway.

“Can you check who that is?” asked Nico with a sidelong look at his vibrating phone. His mouth was taut as he peered through the windshield, worry lines creasing the sides of his eyes. The rain fell steadily on the glass, splashing upward and blurring their vision, even with the wipers’ assistance.

“It says Ma,” read Eli, tilting the screen. “I assume that’s your mother and not Yo-Yo Ma?”

“Funny,” said Nico, not laughing in the slightest. “She’ll freak out if I don’t pick up. Can you answer it?”

“Um, okay...” Eli could do this. He was occasionally charming. There was no reason he should be nervous about talking to the mother of the man he had completely innocent, platonic thoughts about. “Hello?”

“Nico?” A firm voice echoed into Eli’s ear. “You sound funny. Do you have a cold?”

For a very, very brief moment, Eli thought about lowering his voice and doing his best Nico impression, but he held back. “No, Mrs. Meyer. I’m not Nico. I’m Eli.”

“Eli.” She went quiet, then asked, “The hitchhiking carjacker?”

Eli rubbed his forehead. Nico sent him an alarmed glance, presumably because Eli was already showing stress thirty seconds into a phone call with his mother.

“That’s not really what happened,” said Eli. “He’s just giving me a ride to Los Angeles. Where I live, I guess.”

She made a humming noise. It sounded like a verdict, though which way it went, he couldn't tell. "And he's driving right now?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's why I picked up."

There was another long lull. Eli remembered Nico's offer to come out to Mrs. Meyer as a "cathartic experience." Eli pressed his lips together to hold back a fit of laughter. Nico side-eyed him again, drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel in a nervous cadence.

"Eli," Mrs. Meyer continued. "I'm going to ask you some questions, and I want you to answer them without Nico knowing. Can you do that?"

Eli's laughter died away. "Yes, ma'am." As far as he knew, he could pass a background check, and he didn't have any illegal behavior in his past.

"Is he eating?"

*Oh, those kinds of questions.* Apparently, Eli wasn't the only one who had noticed Nico's appetite. He affected a casual tone so as not to tip off her son. "A little more each day. I think."

"Sleeping?"

"As far as I know. I'm not in a position to witness it."

"Is that so?" Her tone was bemused. "Is he actually doing things or just moping around?"

That one was a bit harder to answer. "I'm not sure. How much moping is natural?"

Nico growled. "Give me the phone." Eli reluctantly dropped the device into Nico's open palm, and he raised it to his ear. "Ma, don't use Eli to check on me. I'm healthy, I'm eating, I'm working on my research, my temperature is 98.6, my bowel movements are regular,

and I'm getting eight hours of sleep per day. Now I'm going to hang up before I hydroplane in the middle of nowhere." There was a pause. "Yes, I love you too." Another break, during which Eli could hear stern but indiscernible speech. "Yes, I'll tell him. Bye, Ma."

Nico hung up the phone and tossed it between their seats. "She said to tell you that you're very polite, but you're terrible at subterfuge."

"I think that's a fair assessment," Eli said. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans. Outside, the rain poured harder, transforming the reflection of taillights into red starbursts. "She seems nice. A little gruff, but so are you."

"Please don't talk," said Nico in a quiet voice. Eli opened his mouth to protest, but snapped it shut. Nico's hands were clenched around the wheel, and his chest was rising and falling at an unnatural pace.

"Hey," said Eli carefully. "Do you want to pull over? I can drive for a while."

"I said don't talk," snapped Nico. His face was pale, and he clenched his bottom lip between his teeth.

"Alright," Eli said, but as he settled back into his seat, a sudden bang shook the car, followed by a familiar and unwelcome flapping noise. "Shit," he groaned. "I think we have a flat tire. It's going to suck to change in this weather. There's an exit up there if—" He stopped, unnerved by Nico's silence.

Nico was trembling from head to toe as if the car had dropped fifty degrees in temperature. A drop of blood welled on his lip, the

flesh torn by his bite. He was grasping at his chest, hissing through clenched teeth.

He was having a panic attack. Eli had to get them to a safe location and fast.

“Hey, Nico,” he said, slowing his speech. “Hey. Let’s take that exit up there, okay?”

Nico’s arms locked in a stick-straight position. Eli was going to have to go even simpler to get through to him.

“Let’s hit the turn signal, okay?” Eli scooted toward Nico as best he could without taking the seat belt off. He needed to be able to grab the wheel if it got worse, but if they did crash or spin out, he would need the safety of that belt. “Nico, turn on the turn signal.” He filled the words with a mix of casualness and confidence, trying to infuse Nico with the feeling of control. Nico gave a jerky head nod and reached out with a shaking hand, flicking the turn signal. Even that tiny action made him gasp like he was drowning. Perhaps, in his own way, he was.

“Very good,” said Eli. “Now, take that exit.”

“No,” croaked Nico, shaking his head. “No.”

“Take the exit.” Eli kept his voice firm as if he were guiding a lightning-blinded horse. The van had slowed to nearly thirty miles per hour. While that was good in case they crashed into something else, they were a disabled vehicle going too slow on a wet highway, turning them into an unintentional target.

Nico made a slight whimpering noise.

“Please,” Eli said, still keeping his tone low and gentle. “Please, sweetheart, take the exit.”

With a strangled inhale, Nico turned the wheel ever so slightly until they were safe on the exit ramp. Eli's breath whooshed out of his lungs. Now they just needed to get to a parking lot. Nico was strong, despite what was happening, but even the strongest creatures needed a haven in a storm. Eli just had to help him get there.



# Chapter 11

*Thump thump, thump thump, thump thump* went Nico's heart, racing so fast that his chest would surely explode from the tension.

*Thump thump, thump thump, thump thump* went the flat tire, slapping the wet concrete as he limped Esmeralda up the nearest exit ramp. He craned his neck back and forth, the curtain of rain and fog of panic dulling the senses he needed to get them to safety, and intensifying the emotions that were doing him no good—mainly, fear.

"There's a hotel on the right," said Eli. "I want you to turn right in this driveway. Slowly. There you go. Now pull into that first spot. That's perfect, Nico, that's perfect. Now turn the car off."

Nico did, and as lightning lit the sky outside, his brain felt equally blinded. He gasped for air, tearing at his shirt, because he needed to breathe, needed to make the pain stop.

"Nico." Eli clapped his hands over Nico's, pinning them together. Nico tried to yank them back, but Eli held them steady, like a cowboy trying to rein in a runaway horse. "Look at me." His voice was firm and so serious. Eli was never serious. Something must be wrong. Nico grabbed at his chest again, only able to make a keening "ah, ah, ah" noise.

“You’re having a panic attack. Listen to me. Listen to my voice. The voice that annoys you and talks way too much.”

Eli did talk too much. Nico remembered that. His eyes stopped darting around, and he looked at Eli.

“Tell me five things you can see,” Eli commanded.

*Twisted metal and broken headlights and shattered glass and blood and blood and blood—*

“Nico.” Eli raised one hand to hold Nico’s chin between his thumb and index. “Five things you can see.”

“Your nose,” Nico blurted.

Eli smiled. “Yes, I suppose I did direct your gaze there.”

“Your shirt. Your seat belt. The door handle. Armrest.”

“Good, very good. Four things you can touch.”

*Torn clothes and blood-slick steering wheel and bone where I shouldn’t feel bone and—*

“Your hands.” *Wonderful, strong hands.* “My glasses. My shirt. My pants.”

“Perfect, you’re doing so perfect.” He became aware of Eli’s thumb stroking his knuckle, over and over. “Three things you can hear.”

*My own screams and—*

“You.” *Always talking. Don’t stop talking.* “The rain. Cars.”

“Two things you can smell.”

*Crisp, winter air, so very cold and—*

Nico blinked. “The air? And...car dust.”

“Car dust? Is that a spin-off of stardust?” Eli’s face had moved closer. “One thing you taste.”

Nico's eyes slid to the half-empty cup. "Vanilla milkshake." He let his head thunk against the headrest, too exhausted to say more. His body felt empty now, as if all his adrenaline had overflowed his chest and deflated to a cold void.

"How'd you know how to do that?" Nico mumbled. His lips were numb and swollen.

"My mom had a few when she first got sick." Eli bit his lip. "Did it work?"

Nico closed his eyes and nodded. He hadn't let go of Eli's hand yet. He hoped he wouldn't have to. And then—

"What the absolute fuck?" Eli said with something akin to awe. Nico's eyes snapped open. "What the hell is the Heavenly Honeymoon Hotel?"

Nico tilted his head to look at the hotel's sign—a neon, seizure-inducing, giant heart lit so brightly it stung his eyes. A glittery halo tipped precariously over the top of the hideous heart.

"It's repulsive," Nico said, shielding his eyes as if it were the Ark of the Covenant.

"Luckily, we only need their parking lot," said Eli, and at last, he dropped his hand. Nico felt the loss keenly, a sharp twist in his lungs, but he schooled his face. "You stay here. I'll check the tire."

Nico couldn't have followed him if he had tried. His legs were reduced to jelly, and he hadn't stopped shivering yet. He may have dropped briefly into a light sleep, or it was merely the stupor between terror and ennui. A flash of lightning lit the inside of his lids, and he opened his eyes to meet his reflection in the rearview mirror. The shock of his appearance hit him all at once.

*Grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt.*

His hair was too shaggy. His beard was too messy. His cheeks were too thin. The circles under his eyes were too dark. His skin was too pale.

It was all too much.

Behind the neon haze of the hotel sign, a traffic signal's brilliant green light flickered in the rain, painting his face with distorted verdigris splotches.

Nico squared his jaw. He could fix this. He could start eating better, pick up some vitamins, and maybe some yoga videos. He could start today, with a haircut and beard trim, as soon as Eli fixed the tire.

*That damn tire.* Nico should be out there helping, not simpering in the dry van. He was so damn *unuseful*. He exited on shaky legs, the rain smacking the side of his face. Eli was already flat on his back on the concrete, fiddling with the tire underneath the back bumper. From the waist down, he was exposed to the rain. Nico couldn't help his guilt that Eli was getting positively drenched, right after everything he had done for him, while he sat around like a useless wet noodle.

After a deafening clap of thunder, there was a clatter of tools and a muttered curse from underneath the van.

"Eli," he said, nudging the man's leg with his boot. "Come on out. Grab your suitcase."

Eli popped out from under the van like a drowned gopher, his teeth tinted red from the garish light. "Huh?"

"We can't do this now. It's raining too hard, and there's lightning."

Eli tilted his head, flinching as their surroundings lit up like fireworks. “Then what are we going to do?”

Nico raised his eyes to the hotel’s sign again and sighed. “Spend time inside a life-size valentine.” He held a hand to Eli, who clasped it firmly and leaped to his feet. Eli’s fingers were cold and rain-slick, and Nico fought the urge to keep Eli’s hands for his own again, to warm them and keep them dry and safe. Instead, he let Eli’s hand fall and started toward the front door.

“I wonder how much their velvet budget is,” mused Eli as they dripped in the lobby, their soggy footprints sinking into the plush magenta carpet.

“About as much as Graceland’s, I would imagine.” Nico headed to the front desk, where a dusty, glitter-speckled sign restated the hotel’s name. Underneath, scripted letters read, “Home of the Libation Vessels of Love.”

A rail-thin man with floppy blond hair, who looked as if he could perpetually be a teenager, greeted them with an enthusiastic wave.

“Welcome to the Heavenly Honeymoon Hotel! My name is Andrew! How can I help you celebrate romance today?” Each recited word was said with an enthusiasm that no human should be able to muster.

“Hi,” said Nico, clearing his throat. “We would like to ‘celebrate romance’ today by getting out of the rain and into a hotel room.”

Andrew frowned at him like a toddler who had just been told he couldn’t have a pony. “Normally, all of our rooms are booked far in advance during our busy season.”

*So much for that idea, then.* Nico turned, ready to deliver the news to Eli. Maybe he could help Eli with the tire or hand over tools if he couldn't get onto the ground.

The clerk's frown switched to a giddy beam. "Luckily, it's not our busy season!" He spread out a portfolio detailing their rooms and services with an embellishing wave. He gestured Eli over to the desk. "Come on over; we like couples to make their plans together. All part of the romantic experience!"

"Oh, we're not—" began Nico, but Eli linked a shivering arm in his elbow.

"Oh, honey, I'd love to help," Eli said, running icy fingers over the back of Nico's hand. Nico gave him a strange look before staring down at the portfolio. It was filled with stock pictures of couples laughing, kissing, and feeding each other more strawberries than would be suitable for anyone's digestive tract.

"Perfect!" said Andrew, flipping the pages to a list written in swirling calligraphy. "First, you need to pick your whirlpool type. Your Libation Vessel of Love!"

"Our what?" Nico asked, dreading the answer.

Andrew spun and tapped the wooden sign behind him. "Your Libation Vessel of Love."

"Like a champagne glass whirlpool?" asked Nico. He once saw an advertisement for that sort of thing at a Poconos resort.

"No, no, no." Andrew shook his head. "Not a champagne glass whirlpool. We had those, but we were told not to use them anymore by the original hotel and their very aggressive, very unromantic lawyer." He brightened. "Instead, we decided to celebrate with other

drinking glasses! We feature ten different in-room whirlpools, each with its own theme. Wine glass, pilsner, shot glass. My wife and I had the brandy snifter for our honeymoon.”

“We don’t need a whirlpool.” Nico rubbed at his forehead. “We’re just crashing for the night.”

“But, love muffin,” pouted Eli, lip jutting out. “It’s our anniversary.”

*Love muffin?* Nico had no idea what the hell Eli was doing, but he was too tired to figure it out.

“That’s the spirit!” said the clerk with a toothy grin. “We have the beer stein and the shot glass left. Both are very popular.”

“We’ll take a regular suite,” Nico answered in a no-arguments tone.

“Alright then, but don’t forget to sign the anniversary tree.” Andrew swiped Nico’s credit card. “It’s a Heavenly Honeymoon tradition.” He motioned to a dimly lit room down the hall.

“Come along, sugar bear,” said Eli with a devilish grin.

Nico followed him out of the lobby and Andrew’s earshot. “Sugar bear?” he whispered as Eli broke into brays of laughter.

“I had to sell it,” Eli said. “Now throw your arm around me and act like I’m your precious boo, and you can’t wait to celebrate our anniversary.” He lowered his voice. “The sign said we get free pizza and champagne if it’s our anniversary.”

Nico’s frown slid into a proud grin, and he pulled Eli to him, pressing a hopefully convincing kiss to his temple before spluttering and sticking out his tongue. “You’re all rainwater and hair gel.”

“Darling, you say the sweetest things. Now let’s go check out this anniversary tree.” Eli took Nico’s hand, leaving the other hand free to

scrub the hair gel taste from his lips.

Ducking down the corridor, they slipped into a small room lit only by Christmas lights strung along the walls.

“Ohh,” Eli breathed, his hand instinctively drawn to his heart. “It’s so pretty.”

“It looks like my senior prom,” said Nico, glancing around the decorated room. “Minus the teenage drama. And the tractor pull.”

“Tractor pull? I haven’t even come close to beginning to understand the Midwest.”

The room was decorated in an imitation of an English garden, with low-pile green carpet, a wooden bench, and several faux flower arrangements. The walls were painted in one giant mural of a summery starry night. On the furthest wall was an intricately painted tree, limbs stretched from corner to corner. Hundreds of initials were scrawled on the tree in black pen. Nico traced a few, his fingers following a loopy “K.B. + H.M.” and dancing over “S.T. + D.C.” written in jagged letters. So many stories, all documented below his fingertips with innocent initials.

“Wanna sign?” Eli nudged Nico’s shoulder, handing him a thick black marker from a nearby wicker basket.

Nico tapped the marker against his palm. “I feel like I’m cheating. All these other people were here for real.”

“Maybe we’re celebrating our road trip bromance.” Eli’s eyes widened. “Our bromanciversary! That sounds legit, right?”

“So legit.” Nico chose a spot on one of the branches and scribbled “N.M.” in loose capital letters.



Eli outlined Nico's initials with his fingers, his expression melting into something Nico hadn't seen before. But as Eli caught his inquiring look, he stiffened. "Just making sure the ink is dry." He wrote his initials "E.T." underneath, adding a messy doodled heart before capping the marker. "There. New Mexico hearts Extraterrestrials. It'll give the conspiracy theorists something to think about."

Nico laughed, but neither moved to leave the initial wall. The atmosphere in the room had become solemn and dreamy, as if they had just concluded a momentous ceremony.

Then Eli shivered, and the spell was broken.

"Come on," Nico said, poking Eli in the side to snap him from that peculiar haze. "Let's go. I'm exhausted, and you haven't stopped shaking." Eli nodded and followed Nico out of the garden room.

Arriving at the suite, Eli swiped the key card over the reader, entered the room, and stopped dead in his tracks. Nico jerked to a stop behind him, the toes of his boots catching on Eli's heels.

"What's wrong?" Nico asked before spotting the object of Eli's attention. "Oh. *Oh.*"

Inside, the decor was loaded with excessively cliched romantic objects: red velvet curtains with gold silk tassels, crystal vases filled with roses, and a bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket. On the bedside table sat a bowl of chocolate strawberries. And in the middle of the room was a very large, very grand, very *singular* bed, blanketed in red rose petals.

"Oh, fuck me," said Nico. "Not literally. Don't give me that look." He surveyed the room and wrinkled his nose. *So. Much. Velvet.*

“Well? How do you want to handle this? I can go get the air mattress.”

“We’ll be fine. The bed is huge.” Eli stepped closer to the bed and held one of the rose petals up to examine it. “How is this even romantic? It’s just more clean-up work.” He rubbed it between his fingers until it tore and left red stains. “Are we supposed to lay on them while we fuck? I feel like they would get all sticky and end up in the wrong places.”

“I’m honestly not sure. Maybe we tickle each other with them?” Nico picked one up and blew it toward Eli. It grazed his nose before spinning to the ground like a snowflake.

Eli lifted an eyebrow. “Or, you know....” He scooped up a handful of petals and threw it at Nico. He spat as the petals stuck to his face, still wet with rainwater, and gave Eli a warning growl. Eli’s shriek barely hit the air before he was covered with floral fragments.

“How dare you!” Eli tossed a clump of petals back at Nico. Soon, rose petals flew through the air like confetti, flowery projectiles that had lost all their romantic appeal.

It was fun, good old-fashioned horseplay until Nico let out an agitated hiss and fell back on the bed, clutching his thigh and punctuating the air with pained expletives.

“Fuck!” said Eli, immediately dropping his handful of petals. He leaned over Nico, his eyes round. “Are you alright? I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be so rough.” His blue eyes flared with panic.

Nico almost felt guilty but shook it away, his teeth bared in a tight grimace.

“Is there anything I can do?” asked Eli, leaning near enough that a petal slipped from his shoulder and onto Nico’s exposed neck.

Nico’s arm shot out like a striking rattlesnake and yanked Eli on top of him while his other hand smashed a fistful of rose petals into Eli’s damp hair. Rose juice mixed with rainwater trickled down Eli’s forehead.

Eli’s mouth formed an “O” before he blurted, “You’re not hurt!”

“I’m feeling just fine,” said Nico. “Thanks for asking.” He blew a loose petal from the tip of Eli’s nose.

“You cheated!” Eli’s surprise was endearing. Clearly, the man had never wrestled his way away from seven hyperactive younger siblings.

“We never set any rules for this rose petal wrestling game that we literally just made up.”

“Faking an injury is cheating in any game. Except for maybe charades.”

“Fine,” said Nico. He couldn’t remember the last time he had smiled so widely that his face hurt, but here he was, blessed with aching cheeks. “The next time we engage in rose petal wrestling, I promise not to play the injury card.”

“Thank you,” said Eli with a contented nod. “I accept your apology and surrender.”

“I didn’t say anything about either of those,” said Nico. He reached for the sticky petal remnants on Eli’s temple. “You look like you’ve been shot by a creative gardener with a vengeance.” His thumb grazed Eli’s eyebrow, and even though he was merely wiping away their mess, the gesture felt inexplicably intimate.

Of course, that was when he realized that one of them was lying on top of the other once again. This time, though, there was an unmistakable rigidity in each of their pants. The same revelation crossed Eli's face, and he lifted himself on one arm. In doing so, he pushed his pelvis closer to Nico's, making matters much worse.

"You should probably go take a shower," said Nico, feigning casualness that was answered with a telltale flush creeping up Eli's neck. "Your lips are turning blue."

Eli jumped up from Nico's body as if he'd been electrocuted. He half-heartedly flung one last bunch of limp petals at his head and fled. Nico swore he heard Eli mutter something like *those aren't the only things turning blue* before closing the bathroom door with a click. But it was probably just his imagination.

\* \* \*

Eli absolutely, undoubtedly, and unquestionably should have taken a cold shower. That would be the only way to get rid of the jutting evidence that, just a few weeks after his almost-wedding to a completely different person, he was getting aroused by a rose petal fight with the guy who had felt sorry for him and let him hitch a ride in his van.

Of course, Eli was not known for making the best decisions. He turned the water temperature to magma-level, climbed in the shower, and spilled into one hand within two strokes while biting out a groan into his other.

Panting, he stared at the wall until his vision came back into focus. The bathroom had the same garish decor as the bedroom, tied together by wallpaper dotted with ugly little cherubs.

“I’m so fucked,” Eli whispered. The printed paper cherubs, with their haughty, holier-than-thou pouts, were judging him for all his sins that day, including pleasuring himself to a man who had had an anxiety attack not an hour earlier. Who even did that? The man needed support and consolation, like Eli with his migraines. Instead, Eli had locked himself away in a hotel bathroom because he’d gotten hard during a flowery wrestling match.

“Pull it together, Tenney,” he told himself. After a half-hearted shampoo and scrub, he wrapped himself in a towel and opened the bathroom door with too much force, causing it to ricochet against the wall. Nico, unpacking his toiletries, flinched and dropped his toiletry bag on the floor.

“Shower is yours!” squeaked Eli. So much for pulling it together. He knelt as best he could in a tiny hotel towel and retrieved the bag, holding it out to Nico. He stared down at Eli, his throat working. Eli realized the entire tableau looked like he was proposing to Nico with a leather bag of razors and toothpaste.

“Take it now,” he said through gritted teeth. “Before this gets more awkward. Please.”

Nico’s nose flared, but he snatched the bag from Eli’s outstretched hand before hurrying to the bathroom. At the door’s slam, Eli fell forward to the carpet, uncaring about how the towel draped—or didn’t drape—over his backside.

“I’m so fucked,” he repeated helplessly, his forehead pressed to the carpet. “So, so fucked.”

# Chapter 12

When Nico returned from his shower, his face was calm. Neutral. Emotionless.

So, thought Eli as he lay firmly segregated on his side of the bed. *We're doing this the American way and pretending nothing is happening.*

“Good shower?” asked Eli in an impartial tone, reaching for the remote without any eye contact.

“Fantastic,” said Nico just as neutrally, running his fingers through his shaggy hair. “I need a haircut. I’m using up a whole bottle of complimentary shampoo at every motel.” He glanced at the bed, and his mouth turned down. “Is this my side then?”

He didn’t wait for Eli to answer before lowering himself to the bed, wriggling back to the raised pillows with a wince. He drew the coverlet up and tucked it around his body until only his head was visible. Eli felt like one of the wolfish rakes from his mother’s old bodice rippers, preying on the innocent virgin. Not that Nico was innocent nor a virgin, but the way he hid under the frilly blankets didn’t support that truth.

Eli turned on the television. Things were too awkward to even talk about the weather, but maybe watching it would fill that gap. The bed

shifted as Nico adjusted his position, and Eli asked, “Are you going to get angry if I ask you if your leg is comfortable?”

Nico tilted his head thoughtfully inside his chastity cocoon. “Maybe. But not at you.”

Eli scoffed. “I suppose I can live with that. Is your leg comfortable?”

“It aches. But it’s not unbearable.”

Eli turned on his side, pausing to push down one of the excessive pink velvet pillows enough to see Nico’s face. “You know what would make it better?”

“What’s that?”

“If you could soak it in an oversized shot glass.”

Nico’s chuckle dissolved the tension, and just like that, they were Nico and Eli again—two adventurers having a merry time on Route 66 with no unsavory thoughts whatsoever.

For now.

“Can I ask...what happened with your leg?”

Nico’s laughter died away, and he folded down the coverlet to his ribs. Eli supposed this wasn’t a story that could be told hidden under the blankets. Nico’s forlorn expression made Eli want to hide under the blankets himself.

“I was driving home late from my parents’ house. I live in one of the Indy suburbs, but where they are, it’s all dark country roads and ditches. It was sleeting and I was driving too fast. I had this old Chevelle—it was gorgeous, by the way,” he said when Eli recoiled at the loss of the classic car. “But I always drove it too fast. Like an idiot. An invincible idiot.”



He blew out a shaky breath. “The road had a sharp curve. I flew right through it and hit a group of trees at top speed. The car flipped back into the ditch. Nobody found me for hours.” His lip curved in a sardonic smile. “Most people that live around there have better sense than to be out driving in that weather. And I didn’t have anyone waiting for me at home.”

Eli wasn’t sure what hurt more—the thought of Nico being in such pain, all alone, or his present self-hatred. Unable to find appropriate words of consolation, he slipped his hand over the comforter and took Nico’s, brushing against his knuckles. Nico froze, and for a moment, Eli thought perhaps he had been too forward. But then Nico threaded their fingers until their hands nestled perfectly together, like two stacked teacups in a cupboard.

“I was unconscious for most of it, but I woke up a few times, for a few seconds at a time. Everything was dark. Everything was cold. Everything hurt. But the worst part was the loneliness.” He swallowed, his head turning away from Eli. “I wasn’t scared of dying. Just of being so goddamned alone.”

“Nico...” Eli murmured.

Nico turned back to him, his eyes filled with fear. Within the span of one blink, it was gone, his face schooled back to neutrality. “And that’s all I remember until I woke up in a hospital, ten days later, with my parents waiting at my bedside.”

“And that’s when you told them you were bisexual, right?” Eli said, hoping his deadpan voice would spear through the draped melancholy that stifled the room.

Nico barked out a laugh that cracked through the gloom. “No, that’s when I was a teenager. Trust me, when I woke up, I felt every one of my thirty-nine years.” He grimaced and shifted positions again. “Still do. Anyway, after that, I still didn’t remember that much. Brain injuries are tricky things. Sometimes I knew what I wanted to say, but I couldn’t get that message to my mouth. Other times, I would look at someone, and I know that I knew them and everything about them except something completely basic. I scared the hell out of one of my sisters when I recalled a memory of the two of us in perfect detail, but couldn’t remember her actual name. But I got better, I healed some, and I went home. And that’s when the memories came back.”

“And the panic attacks?”

Nico’s jaw worked. “They started around the same time.”

“Did you have them before?”

“No. Believe it or not, I was a charmingly grumpy and confident guy who barely got a yearly cold, let alone a bad leg and panic attacks.”

Eli waved that away. “You’re still a charmingly grumpy and confident guy. You just have additional characteristics now.”

“Hmmm.” Nico pursed his lips together.

“And look at you now! Behind the wheel, back on the road again.” Eli began to whistle the Willie Nelson tune until Nico sent him a quelling glare.

“Yeah,” Nico scoffed. “I’m barely driving the minimum speed limit, and breaking into cold sweats at every little movement. Maybe it’s self-induced immersion therapy, I dunno.” He turned back to the

television, snuggling back under his protective comforter, signaling that the conversation was over.

But Eli's bravery often overflowed into foolishness, so he said, "Can I rub it?"

Nico blinked, the reflection of the television in his glasses distorting the view of his lashes. "I'm sorry, what?" He pulled the blanket all the way to his chin.

Eli's eyes rounded. "I meant your leg. Your leg!"

Nico narrowed his eyes. "Why would you do that? For good luck?"

"No. I just thought maybe, since you're in the van all day, it would help." Suspicion dissolved into wariness in Nico's expression. "And you did it for me when I was hurting. I promise I won't go higher than mid-thigh. I won't go anywhere near your, uh, little professor."

"Oh dear God." Nico yanked the blanket up over his head, but not fast enough that Eli didn't catch the scarlet flush across his cheeks.

"I mean, I know it's our anniversary and all, but—"

Nico smacked the covers away from his face. "I'll put up with sugar bear, love muffin, cuddle monkey—"

"I don't recall ever having said 'cuddle monkey.'"

"Whatever. I draw the line at any discussions with the phrase, 'my little professor.'" He threw the covers off further, kicking them down the bed until his sleep shorts and the leg in question were bared. It was a surly movement, but Eli saw it for what it really was—a tiny flicker of trust.

Eli studied Nico's leg. Nico rarely wore anything but loose track pants, so Eli hadn't really had a chance to look at it before. His right

leg had a few scars, one trailing down the side of the thigh, the other a tight line next to his shin bone. His left leg, though, was a story all within a single limb. He reached out a finger to trace the angry pitted mark that ran from mid-thigh down. Even six months past, it had that gray-pink color of a freshly healed wound, the skin folded into itself like a valley between mountains.

“Surgery scar,” said Nico.

Eli dipped his chin and let his hand trail downward to the worst scar of all. It started mid-calf and forked into three jagged paths of puckered skin. The overall shape of the calf muscle was distorted, as if a rabid beast had torn into it.

“I’m not even going into detail on that one,” Nico said. “You don’t want to hear it, trust me. Just know that it’s from the wreck itself.”

Eli hummed in acknowledgment, and moved back up his leg, palming the taut thigh muscle and giving it an experimental squeeze. Nico inhaled through his teeth, and Eli let go.

“Ignore me,” breathed Nico. “I can take it. Do your worst.”

And Eli did. He rubbed and stroked Nico’s leg, seeing each tense area as a challenge to conquer. Nico’s hands gripped the blanket, but he remained silent, his eyes squeezed shut.

“I think I’ve seen this episode before,” Eli said as he continued.

“Huh?” Nico’s voice had risen an octave with discomfort.

Eli jutted his jaw toward the old sitcom playing on the television. “This is the one where Uncle Jesse wrecks Danny’s car on his birthday.” He frowned. “Maybe not the best one to watch in light of things.” He reached for the remote, but Nico’s hand grabbed it first.

“It’s fine,” he said, and a smile danced on his lips. “I’ve seen the episode. This is my sister’s favorite show. Leave it.”

Eli wasn’t sure if it was the massage, the familiar television show, or the comfortable domesticity of the evening, but Nico finally melted, tension that he’d held since the flat tire disappearing.

“Thank you for telling me about your leg,” Eli murmured. “I appreciate that.”

“Mmm,” said Nico, making the most relaxed sound Eli had ever heard from the man. Nico’s eyes were closed, so he slowed his kneading to a halt. At the sound of whisper-soft, even breaths, Eli allowed himself to look at the sad, strange, beautiful man.

In sleep, Nico looked so much younger. Worried wrinkles became laugh lines, and his forehead smoothed as if he’d never experienced a single sorrowful moment. Even his untamed hermit hair seemed to relax, transforming him into a mysterious, warrior-like hero. Had he been this moody, melodramatic creature as a kid? Eli stifled a laugh, picturing a bearded toddler standing on some daycare’s activity table, bellowing Greek poetry at the top of his tiny lungs.

Eli’s arms had never felt so inherently empty. They ached with the ridiculous need to tug Nico close, to press kisses to those unruly waves, to feel the rise and fall of his chest against his own. It was not a good or responsible ache, so he ignored it. Instead, he lay tense and flat on his back, his hands chaste and obedient as his side.

But halfway through the next episode, Nico’s head dropped from the sanctity of his own pillow to the dangerous, sinful area known as Eli’s shoulder. Eli froze, unsure whether to wake Nico, or to imitate a

Buckingham Palace soldier and remain unaffected despite the fact that every neuron was on high alert.

“Sorry,” Nico said, the words muffled by Eli’s shirt. “I’ll move.” But he didn’t. He snuggled his cheek closer into Eli’s warmth like an oversized, grouchy kitten.

Eli let his own head drop, caressing the side of his own cheek against the top of Nico’s head. He smelled like generic hotel shampoo and that damned coconut body wash. Eli brushed a loose tendril of unruly hair away from his face. Nico’s nose twitched a little from the movement, but he didn’t wake. Eli took that as a sign to stop, and eased himself away, wriggling his shoulder until Nico grimaced in his sleep and rolled over.

Eli regretted the absence of his warmth before it was even gone. He gazed at Nico once more, drinking in his peaceful countenance, before he flipped the light switch and drifted into sleep.

# Chapter 13

The road followed the creek, and the car followed the road. Twining like an overgrown grapevine, the road wound through acres of lush corn stalks, ready for harvest.

“Alright, assholes, listen up,” Nico said, gripping the steering wheel. “You know the drill. We’ve only got so much time before this all goes to hell, and I’ve got things to discuss.”

“Go ahead,” said Zeus, his brow furrowed slightly at Nico’s directness. “We’re ready.”

“I’m having—” Nico took a deep inhale. “I’m having *feelings*.” He exhaled and waited for the others to respond.

They said nothing, merely staring at him with confused looks.

“We know,” said Scrooge after a moment, taking off his gloves and folding them in his lap. “We’re part of your brain.”

“Then tell me what to do!” Nico sputtered. “Tell me how to get rid of them!”

“You can’t just get rid of feelings,” said Zeus. “They can’t be just zapped away with a lightning bolt.”

“I don’t like them.”

“Why not?”

“They’re...inconvenient,” Nico said.

“Of course,” said Zeus. “Anything worthwhile is.” He tapped at his teeth before snapping his fingers. “I know just the person to help you.”

“Who?” asked Nico. “Tiny Tim? Romeo? The Lorax?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The god pointed a thumb at the back seat, where an elegant and handsome man in an overcoat appeared. The man sent Nico an awkward grimace, clearly ruffled to be in such a state.

“Who are you?” asked Nico. “And is that a cravat?” His eyes widened. “Oh no. Not you. Zeus, I changed my mind. Bring me the Lorax.”

“Good afternoon,” said the man. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, even under such—” He squinted at his surroundings. “Unusual circumstances. I’m Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy.”

Nico rubbed his forehead. “Really, Zeus? *This* is who you picked?”

“He’s a beloved character, and *Pride and Prejudice* is considered by many to be the pinnacle of romantic literature.”

“Fine, fine.” Nico took a deep breath and met Darcy’s eyes in the mirror. “There’s this guy.” He paused. “Is that a problem?”

Zeus barked a laugh. “Have you read nothing about me?”

Darcy coughed. “There was this one time, with Bingley, that I...” He trailed off with a blush.

Scrooge just shrugged, biting into an apple. “Bob Cratchit has a nice ass.”

“Alright, alright.” Nico made a silencing gesture with his hand. “I don’t want to know.”



“It would hardly be prudent for your imaginary friends to be homophobic,” Darcy pointed out.

“You’re right.” Nico felt his face flush. “I, uh, I don’t know what to do. I haven’t been in a relationship in years. I’m not someone who is generally out for a commitment. And now there’s Eli, and he’s in my van, and he’s there all the time, and he talks way too much, but sometimes his nose does this cute scrunch thing—”

“Ah, I see.” Darcy nodded. “I’ve got this. I know exactly what you must do.” He held up a slender finger. “First, you must get him to ask you to dance.”

“My leg—” began Nico, but Darcy interrupted him.

“But when he asks you, you must say ‘no.’ Then, have him come over to your house, or in your case, your van.” Darcy’s mouth fumbled over the word that was, at least to him, completely new. “But make sure it’s raining.”

“We’ve got that part down.”

“And then generally be a jerk for a while.”

“Coincidentally, I’ve got that part down too.” Nico grimaced. “So what now?”

“Oh, now is the best part.” A wide grin spread across Darcy’s face. “Now you need to insult his family and his status.”

“I...what?”

Darcy spread his hands as if he were revealing the secret to a magic trick. “But you have to do it *while proposing*.”

Nico sent a pointed glare to Zeus, who frowned. “Maybe I misjudged his usefulness,” admitted the god.

“You misjudged him most ardently,” muttered Nico.

“Look, don’t listen to him,” said Scrooge, tossing his apple core at Darcy. The gentleman caught the debris and dropped it just as quickly, wiping his hands on his pantaloons. “Lower the irritability, and just be yourself. And maybe buy him a giant roast turkey and lots of toys.”

Nico looked helplessly toward Zeus.

“Don’t look at me,” Zeus said. “Everyone in this vehicle will agree that I’m the last person to ask for love advice. I’m just going to tell you to turn yourself into an animal and commit crimes.” He lifted his chin toward the waiting sycamores. “Time to slow down.”

“Useless, all of you,” mumbled Nico. He tapped the gas pedal, saluted the others as they vanished, and drove his Chevelle into a tree.

\* \* \*

When Eli blinked awake the following day, an hour before the alarm was scheduled, Nico’s body twitched next to him. The man cried out, and Eli shook him, worried he was in physical pain or having a nightmare.

“Nico.” He shook him harder, raising his voice. “Nico, wake up.”

Nico’s body stilled, and his eyes flew open. “Huh?” His eyes widened, but the terror in them dissipated as he took in their surroundings.

“You had a dream,” said Eli gently.

Nico frowned. "Oh." The tension left his shoulders, and he nestled his head further into the pillow.

"Are you alright?"

Nico was silent for a long time, studying Eli with sleepy eyes. Eli wanted to turn away from the gentle ferocity of that gaze, but he stayed still, never breaking eye contact.

"I'm not going to propose to you," Nico said at last. "Or insult your family. And your social standing is just fine." He reached out and stroked the bridge of Eli's nose. Eli scrunched up his nose, trying to hold back a laugh or sneeze.

"There it is," said Nico. "That's exactly what I was talking about." With a dreamy smile, he tapped the end of Eli's nose. Then Nico closed his eyes and fell back to sleep.

Eli wasn't about to follow him into sleep after that confusing exchange. He stood and dressed, and took the keys from the dresser. Glancing back at Nico snoring in the luxurious bed, he chuckled and rubbed his nose thoughtfully before leaving the room.

\* \* \*

When Eli returned, Nico was awake, blinking at the filtered sunlight and looking somewhat like a confused bear cub coming out of hibernation.

"Hey," Eli said, unsure of the proper words to say when one has a phenomenally handsome guy laying platonically in one's bed.

Especially a phenomenally handsome guy who had refused to propose to him in the early morning hours.

“Hey.” Nico seemed so young at that moment, his dark hair a messy shadow among the frills and laces of the pillows. “Good morning.”

“I brought you some coffee,” said Eli, gesturing to the paper cups on the table. “And these.” He held up a pair of silver hair scissors.

“Thank you,” said Nico, reaching for the coffee. “I don’t know how to cut my own hair though.”

“No, but I do,” said Eli, ripping open the packaging.

“Really?”

“Yep,” said Eli, snapping the shears in the air. “I’m not Vidal Sassoon or anything, but I would shape my mom’s hair when it was growing back between treatments. And a couple of the guys at the garage found out I did my own hair, so I practiced on them.” His smile was devious. “Sometimes it turned out good.”

“Sometimes.” Nico blew out a breath. “Alright. Let me get dressed, and we can try it.” He smiled, but it was wary.

“Sounds good,” said Eli—and then he dropped the shears. He scrambled to pick them up, holding them up like Arthur with Excalibur. Nico took the shears, flipped them point-side down, and placed them back in Eli’s fingers.

After Nico was dressed, he sat on a chair in the middle of the carpet, a bath towel wrapped around his neck.

“I’m gonna take off some of the bulk with the shears,” murmured Eli, running his fingers through Nico’s scraggly beard. “And then use my clippers on the rest.”

Nico leaned his head back, baring his throat for Eli. Eli's breath caught as he looked at the expanse of skin, the sinewy length of his neck. He wanted to bite him.

"What?" asked Nico, and Eli realized he'd said that last part aloud.

"I said, don't fight me," Eli corrected, and he tilted Nico's head in a better position to hack away at the lumberjack-worthy facial hair. His neck still looked biteable, but not blatantly so.

"Talk to me," said Nico in a strangled voice. "That's what hairdressers do. Tell me about yourself."

"What don't you already know? I'm twenty-five, I'm an unemployed mechanic, and I'm recently dumped."

"Nah, besides that. Just—" Nico swallowed as Eli leaned closer to snip near his jawline. "Tell me about you."

So Eli did. He told him about growing up with a single mother in Los Angeles, since his dad had jetted out when he was a baby. He told him about how he liked hands-on work much more than academics, and how he and his mom would do model car kits together. He told him about the time he got to drive a 1974 Chevy Impala to his senior prom, and ended up ducking out on his date so that he could drive it around some more. He told him he liked fresh tomatoes but not tomato sauce, preferred X-Men comics over the rest of the Marvel world, and wanted to adopt a Dalmatian someday to fulfill his inner child's firefighter fantasies.

Information poured out of him like rainwater, and Nico listened intently to every word. Neither admitted that the entire exercise was simply to fend off the anticipatory tension swirling in the air, tension

that had begun with the application of two simple sets of initials to a fake painted tree.

When Eli finished, dark curls littered the carpet like strips of ebony tree bark. “I should ask if they have a vacuum for me to borrow,” said Eli, wincing at the floor.

“It’s a honeymoon hotel. They’ve seen far worse.” Nico shuddered. “So much worse.”

“Come on,” said Eli. “Let’s go look.” He held out his hand. Nico stared at his palm and set his hand on it. Eli wasn’t just offering Nico help to stand. He wanted to touch him, and Nico was giving him that honor, whether he knew it or not.

He led Nico to the bathroom mirror. Nico glanced at his reflection, and his lips twitched with amusement and a hint of pride.

“Holy shit,” breathed Eli, looking at the tamed waves and trim beard. “You look like a Disney prince.”

Nico pivoted from side to side, checking his hair in the mirror. “Hopefully not the Beast.”

“No. More like Prince Eric.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Not the brightest guy, but I’ll take it.”

“You know your Disney movies.”

“Oldest of eight, remember?” Nico adopted the air of an arrogant intellectual. “Besides, we can use Disney movies to study cultural trends from the time of their release through the filter of popular folklore, fairy tales, and legends.”

“And ballads. Heaven help us if you forget ballads.” Eli clicked his tongue and winked. “So who’s your favorite Disney character then, Professor? Belle with all the books?”

“I don’t know. Ursula had a good gift for dealing with people who talk too much.” Nico reached for Eli’s throat and mimed yanking his voice box out. “I have to think about it. What about you?” His nostrils flared. “Don’t say Bambi, please.”

“Of course not,” said Eli, puzzled at the request. “I think for me, it’s Stitch. He’s hyper and accidentally destroys things a lot, but he’s adorable. As most hyper and accidentally destructive things are.”

Nico’s gaze softened. “I suppose they are.” He cleared his throat. “I always related to Shang.”

Eli searched his brain. “From *Mulan*?”

“Yeah. He was responsible for all those people. And always had to make the hard decisions and do the right things.” He stopped admiring his hair in the mirror as if realizing that he had no time for even a fraction of vanity, and dropped his eyes to the counter.

Eli took Nico’s chin and tipped his face upward until their eyes met. “If I recall, Shang made a decision that ended up being wrong. But he thought it was right at the time—because people are fallible. And then he gave up control for once and followed someone else.” The newly groomed man looked startled at that thought, but Eli continued. “And you know what happened? *They saved all of fucking China.*”

Nico’s gaze darted to Eli’s lips, and Eli stiffened every muscle so as not to crash their mouths together. Instead, he ran his hands through the fresh-cut curls. It was meant to be an innocent final check of his styling skills, but Nico’s subsequent shudder nearly did him in.

Eli snipped one last tendril, letting the ringlet spin in the air like the last autumn leaf until it landed on the counter. “All done. Let’s pack up.”

Nico left a substantially large tip for housekeeping, leaving it on the table as they left.

“No money can ever erase the horrors they must see in a honeymoon hotel,” he said with a deadpan face.

Eli chuckled, but his smile faded as they rolled their suitcases down the hallway, passing the anniversary tree room. Something had been transformed in that room last night, something meaningful and frightening. He peeked into the room once more, looking longingly at the tree. If he squinted, he could see their initials among the dozens of others—four letters standing bold in the dim light, unaware of the events they may have set in motion.



# Chapter 14

“Oh, God,” moaned Eli, clutching at his chest. “It hurts. It hurts.”

“Calm your dramatic ass down,” said Nico. “It’s just a tourist attraction.”

“But these are classics!” Eli flailed a hand toward the ten antique cars planted hood first into the ground in an artistic abomination titled “Cadillac Ranch,” just outside of Amarillo, Texas. “The potential restorations I could do! And instead, they’re covered in graffiti.” He shoved his hands through his hair. “*Graffiti!*”

“It’s art,” said Nico with a profound smirk. “Commentary on capitalism and the destruction of the soul or something like that.”

“It’s a tragedy. I can’t do it. Let’s go back to the Quarter Horse Museum. Maybe there’s a Half Horse Museum. Ooh, a One-Third Horse Museum?”

“Eli, pick up the spray can. You can do this. Believe in yourself, and the magic will happen.” Nico tossed his own spray can of paint into the air, catching it with a grin.

Eli glanced up at the dilapidated Cadillac covered in layers of graffiti, like a rainbow had tripped from the sky and collapsed over the rusty metal. He made the sign of the cross and held up his own

spray can, wincing as he pressed the nozzle. A pathetic dribble of yellow paint dripped to the ground.

“Come on, you can do better than that. This isn’t vehicular blasphemy.” Nico sprayed his own paint in a simple blue swirl across the car’s hood. The nozzle let out a satisfying hiss that sounded like a shushing librarian.

“I don’t know what to write,” said Eli. A few cars down from them, another group of visitors laughed and whooped as they covered their chosen Cadillac with colorful stripes.

“Let’s go with what we know best, then.” Nico added his initials under his elementary swirl. “Your turn.”

Eli’s neck prickled with that same eerie awareness he’d experienced back at the Heavenly Honeymoon Hotel, dripping rainwater and shivering in front of a painted tree. He knelt and added “E.T.” under Nico’s initials, and felt like he was signing away something important, something precious. Nico’s paint dripped into Eli’s, and where the drops settled, the two colors mixed and married into green.

“Sorry,” said Nico, holding a hand out to help Eli up, his other hand bracing his own body against a dry spot on the car. “I sprayed it too thickly.” His hand was rough and warm, and for a brief moment, neither let go as they gazed at their initials.

Another drop hit the letters, but it wasn’t paint. It was joined by others, a sprinkle of rain that multiplied. The rain felt wonderful in the midday heat, cooling Eli’s sweat-dampened forehead.

“We really need to start carrying an umbrella,” he sighed, dropping Nico’s hand. “Where to next?”

Nico frowned as he peered up into the sky. “I don’t like the look of those clouds. Let’s head back to the motel.”

The skies quickly became an eerie shade of green and leaves danced over the road like early, misguided snowflakes. Eli’s ears wanted to pop, and Nico’s hands were tight on the wheel as he wrestled the wind attacking the van’s wide profile.

“This is some Auntie Em shit right here,” muttered Nico, parking outside their motel and gathering up the takeout sub sandwiches they had snagged on the way home. Eli followed, his hands filled with the usual milkshakes—strawberry vanilla swirl for Eli, and once again, plain vanilla for Nico.

“Isn’t tornado season in the spring?” Eli asked.

Nico shrugged as he shoved the key into the hotel door, the wind whipping his dark locks fiercely in a wild tug-of-war. If it weren’t for the greasy paper bags of food in his hands, he’d look like a victorious general on some long-ago battlefield. “Probably the strongest in the spring and early summer,” he said, raising his voice over the wind’s whine. “But they aren’t unheard of in the fall.”

A siren went off, the impersonal wail sending unwelcome friction skittering down Eli’s spine just as Nico wrenched the door open.

“What do we do now?” Eli asked, clutching the milkshakes to him like a life jacket. “There’s no basement! It’s a one-story hotel!”

“I think we’re eating dinner in the bathroom,” Nico said, moving past him and flicking on the bathroom light. He beckoned for Eli to bring the shakes inside, as if they were merely having a picnic instead of reenacting the movie *Twister*.

“What? Why? How are you so calm?” Eli followed him into the bathroom, unashamed of how close he was to Nico’s back, as if the taller man could block the storm through sheer willpower and muscles alone.

“I’m from Indiana. It’s not Tornado Alley, but we get our share.” Nico placed the bag of sandwiches next to the sink with the casualness of someone unloading everyday groceries.

“And it’s perfectly normal to just huddle up like you’re in London during the Blitz?” Eli closed the bathroom door and leaned back against it. He shook his hands in an attempt to work out the nervous tension.

“Sure.” Nico sipped his shake. “We even do tornado drills in school.”

“Tornado drills.”

“No different than your earthquake drills, just a weirder position. You squat down into a ball against a wall—” Nico squinted an eye and studied the ground before awkwardly going to his knees. “And you fold yourself up like this, and...this was easier when I was four feet tall.” His left leg jutted behind him, but the rest of his body curled up against the wall in an approximation of a disgruntled armadillo. His hands twined together behind his neck, an action presumably meant to protect him from debris and broken glass and falling Kansas farmhouses.

“You look like a capsized turtle,” said Eli, stretching out a hand to help Nico to his feet. “Do you think Esmeralda will be alright?”

“She’s a sturdy enough van,” said Nico. His gaze softened, and he brushed his long fingers down Eli’s arm, back and forth. “Hey,

don't look so worried, okay? Maybe our anthropomorphic characterization has gone too far. She'll be fine. And she's just a van."

"She's just a van," Eli repeated. Their home away from home, his current residence, and their only means of travel, but sure, just a van. A horrifying thought struck. "Your laptop is in the van."

"It'll be fine." Nico waved off any concern, but Eli jumped to his feet.

"It won't be fine! Everything you've worked on so far is on that laptop." He swung open the door and sprinted from the bathroom.

"Eli?" Nico asked, following with a wary look.

Eli ignored him and threw open the front door, wincing at the green-gray sky and erratic lightning flashes. He darted out into strong winds that battered at his cheeks and stung his eyes. Reaching the van felt monumental, and he had to brace one of the back doors open with his hip. He fumbled around until his fingers snagged the straps of Nico's backpack. "Got you," he muttered, turning to make the mad dash back.

"Eli, get back here!" yelled Nico from the open doorway. "What the fuck are you doing? Get in here!" He started toward Eli, but Eli was already racing toward him, panting with exertion. He ran past Nico, who slammed the door shut against Mother Nature in all her fury.

"Here." Eli clumsily handed over the backpack. "It got a little wet but—"

Nico tossed the bag behind him without a glance, ignoring the consequent thunk of a possibly broken laptop. Eli's eyes widened,

but before he could protest, Nico's hand had wrapped around his upper arm, dragging him into the bathroom and closing the door. Nico leaned against it, his forehead pressed to the wood.

"You—" Eli started, but Nico whirled around, his face pale and contorted with anger.

"What were you thinking?" he snapped. Eli jerked as Nico's voice echoed off the tiles.

"Your work, it's all on there. I didn't want you to lose anything and..." He trailed off when he realized Nico's face was darkening with every word.

"It's all saved on the cloud!" he bit out.

"Oh." Eli felt the heat burning up his cheeks like flame to paper.

Nico's nostrils flared. "Oh? *Oh?*" He took a menacing step toward Eli, but froze as the lights flickered. He inhaled and looked upward fiercely, as if he wanted to shame the storm into stopping. "Get in the shower."

"Get in the what?"

"The shower, Eli! It's the safest place in a tornado." He stalked to the shower curtain and flung it open, gesturing at Eli like an annoyed butler. Eli stepped into the shower-tub combo and Nico yanked the curtain closed behind them with an energy better suited for a slammed door.

The two men stood at opposite ends of the tub. Nico glowered, looking as broody as any man could, standing fully dressed in the shower.

"I can honestly say, that of all the—" Eli began, but Nico cut him off with a single gesture, swiping his hand through the air like a

saber.

“I need you to explain something to me,” Nico said slowly, his coffee-colored eyes intent on Eli’s. “I have known you for less than two weeks. *Less than two weeks.*”

“Y-yes?” Eli said. The storm outside the hotel room howled like a freight train. The storm roiling inside Eli was just as tumultuous.

“And I just can’t—” Nico swore and raked an agitated hand through his hair. “I mean, how the hell do you keep putting yourself in danger? You’re always in some kind of peril, like an annoying Lois Lane.” Nico pinched the bridge of his nose and let out an exasperated sigh. “If you’re not running through a tornado, you’re tripping over your own feet or passing out at your own wedding.”

“I don’t need—” Eli began, but the expression on Nico’s face had him snapping his mouth shut. He fell back against the wall, the tiles cold through his thin shirt.

Nico reached out his hand, tracing the side of Eli’s jaw and surveying him like some sort of unsolvable puzzle. His thumb shook against Eli’s skin. “You make me feel... You make me feel...” His voice was hoarse with new emotion.

He began to draw his hand away, but Eli clapped his own over it with renewed determination, holding it against his jaw. “I make you feel what?”

“*Scared.*” The taller man’s expression was wrecked with panic and bewilderment and something softer, something Eli didn’t want to name for fear of losing it. His other hand traced the line of Nico’s temple, and Nico leaned into his touch.

Nico stared at Eli, his gaze only diverted by fleeting glances at his lips. Then with a frustrated growl, Nico grabbed his shirt with trembling hands, dragged him close, and kissed him.

Nico kissed like he was dominating and surrendering at the same time. At first, the kisses were merely soft sips at Eli's mouth, after which he pulled back to look at Eli. "This okay?" he whispered.

Eli nodded, drunk on surprise and lust. "S'okay," he managed before tilting his head again. Nico got the message and crashed his mouth back onto Eli's.

Sirens were going off in Eli's head, or maybe that was just the tornado warning. They should stop. They should absolutely stop, because this could be dangerous, this could be detrimental, this could be...*delightful*.

The lights blinked, and Nico startled a bit as he kissed down Eli's neck, tongue flicking at his pulse point. Eli seized the opportunity to take charge, stepping forward and pressing Nico's back against the opposite shower wall. Nico yelped, wriggling to the right.

"Did I hurt you?" Eli yanked his hands back.

"What? Shower thing...handle...lever... Fuck all..." murmured Nico, head twisting as he chased Eli's lips.

Apparently, lust made ol' Professor Meyer absolutely incoherent, and it was *awesome*.

Eli clumsily reached for Nico's waistband, undoing the button and zipper with shaking fingers. Nico groaned as Eli freed him from his boxers. He was thick and ruddy, warm to the touch. When Eli grasped him in his right hand, a wild look took over Nico's darkened



eyes. He reached for Eli's pants and had him released within moments.

"Fuck," said Nico. "Fuck, Eli. God, that's good." He refitted Eli's clasp around their cocks, and held their hands together as Eli shuttled his hand over them. The lights flickered again, and white sparks danced around the base of his spine like witches at a campfire.

"I've wanted this since that stupid hotel," choked out Nico, each word nearly lost within its own breath.

"Which hotel was that?"

"I think...oh God...I think...all of them."

*Holy shit.* Dizzy with the most basic form of need, Eli slammed a hand against the wall for balance, but instead caught the lip of the shower faucet handle. The lever gave way and slid to the right, dousing them in ice-cold water.

"Jesus!" barked Nico.

The water smacked Eli in the face, a polar vortex slap against overheated skin. He shrieked and blustered out a curse. They scrambled to turn the lever back as sirens wailed, lights flashed, and Eli's shoes filled with water. Through a flurry of expletives, coughs, and Eli slipping in a puddle, one of them managed to turn the shower off. They stared at each other, panting like marathon racers.

"You...crazy...bastard," gasped out Nico, his voice cracking. Then he snatched Eli's soaking shirt and tugged him forward once more. Their lips slammed into each other, and Nico grabbed their cocks again. One, two, three near-violent strokes more, and Eli's head fell back in a noiseless scream as he came over Nico's fist.

Nico followed moments later, and he collapsed back against the wall, yanking Eli to his chest.

“Well,” murmured Nico after a moment.

“Well,” Eli slurred, his mind and body crash-landing back to Earth. His ears rang from his orgasm, but that was the only reason—the sirens had stopped. “I think the storm’s over.”

Nico stared down at him with feverish eyes, dark curls dripping water in a trail from forehead to nose tip, chest heaving, pants undone, and softening cock on full display. And then, he started laughing like a maniac, pulling Eli close and kissing his forehead and chuckling into his damp hair. Eli rested his forehead in the crook of Nico’s neck, loving the way the taller man draped his arms around his waist. He wasn’t quite as in love with the way his clothes were waterlogged and clinging to him like plastic wrap, but even so, he wouldn’t trade this moment for anything.

But just as sirens and storms came and went, so did moments like this. Nico stepped out of the shower carefully and helped Eli out to prevent further spills. The pair shuffled into the main room, watery footprints rumpling the carpet and marking their trail. Eli checked the window first, but other than scattered litter and a few branches in the wrong places, everything was as it should be. Even Esmeralda sparkled in the newly emerged sunlight, having survived the storm with every rusty part intact.

Nico came up behind him, and pressed a kiss to the delicate skin behind Eli’s ear. It was a shy, uncertain question compared to his plunderous, direct movements just a few minutes earlier. “Now comes the hard part,” Nico said.

Eli dipped his chin, unable to meet the reflection of Nico's eyes in the glass, let alone the man himself. "If this is just a one-time thing," he murmured, "I'd be okay with that, if that's what you want. I won't make things difficult."

Nico paused his ministrations on Eli's neck. "Well, while we definitely need to talk about that, I was actually referring to the fact that we're both in soaking wet jeans that are going to be a bitch to take off."

Eli's eyes widened, and excitement sparked in his chest. If Nico was joking, there might be a chance of...well, *something*, right?

After much shimmying, tugging, cursing, and questioning why they were even wearing jeans in Texas in late summer, the two men were detached from their jeans. They took separate showers to prevent further distractions, and then collapsed on one of the beds, on their backs with only their fingertips touching.

"You're too young for me," Nico finally said, breaking the silence. His dark eyes never left the ceiling.

Eli stiffened. Of the myriad of reasons this was not a good idea, that's what Nico was going with? "Yeah? And my eyes are blue."

Nico rolled over, propping himself up on one elbow. "Excuse me?"

"And my birthday is August twenty-ninth."

"I'm not following this at all."

"And I'm five-foot-ten." He turned on his side to mirror Nico. "What? I thought I'd throw out details on my driver's license other than my age that might help you decide against me."

A sheepish smile unfurled across Nico's face. "You're right. Fuck your age."

Hope stretched out its wings inside Eli's chest. "Then we give this a try?"

Nico was silent, and Eli braced for rejection. But then Nico said, "Just until the end of the road. I can't do anything else. And neither can you."

And on that note, hope plummeted before ever taking flight, but Nico was right. Anything more would be crazy. Eli had a chance to start fresh for the first time in his life, no matter how terrible the circumstances were that granted him that freedom. He had an opportunity that more deserving people never got—how could he ruin that?

"Alright then," Eli said. "I can do that."

"So we have fun, then part as friends, and you start your life over in Los Angeles." Nico held a hand out with mock seriousness.

Eli shook it, sealing the deal with a grin. "So I'm going to Los Angeles then? Your trial period is over?"

Nico ran long fingers through Eli's drying hair. "Yes, you can stay. But I still control the radio."

# Chapter 15

If you were to survey a thousand people and ask them where the most romantic places to fall in love were, you'd probably get the usual answers, like a candlelight café in Paris, or an enchanted rose garden, or at the top of the Empire State Building. A few others might mention their high school prom, or Strawberry Fields in Central Park, or that the location really didn't matter as long as it was love at first sight.

Probably no one would say a rusty old van traveling at exactly the speed limit down one of the most famous roads in the country, but here Eli was, falling in love with Professor Nico Meyer in exactly that environment.

He wasn't sure quite when it had started to feel like love. It wasn't during the ghost tour in Albuquerque. Any hand-holding and heart flutters were entirely the fault of the ghost in the chapel in Old Town, and had nothing to do with romance.

It couldn't have been at the El Rancho Hotel in Gallup either. Any shy laughter and flirty kicks under the dinner table while they ate at the hotel's famous restaurant was completely because they were entertained by their meals. Hamburgers named after famous leading

men were simply amusing and caused gooey feelings inside his chest—heartburn, not heartache.

It definitely wasn't the next day at the El Rancho, either, when they were groaning in their darkened room after imbibing one too many cocktails called the Lucille Ball. Eli was happy to forget that day.

And of course it wasn't in Winslow, Arizona, where they took selfies at the Standin' on the Corner Park with a statue of Eagles front man Glenn Frey. Glenn would've told them to take it easy, and there was nothing easy about this wrenching pleasure-pain that expanded in Eli's heart every time he looked at Nico.

No, he was definitely not falling in love, not even as they crooned along with Chuck Berry songs on their detour from Route 66 to the Grand Canyon, not even as they parked and walked slowly to one of the vista points, holding hands like teenagers on a first date.

"You good with this?" Eli's question was a simple check-in, nothing more. Since Nico didn't like to be coddled, Eli had become an expert at clinical inquiries only.

"Yes," answered Nico. "Are you?"

Eli frowned. "Of course, why?"

Nico paused, biting the side of his lip. "You ran longer than normal this morning. I thought maybe you'd be sore."

Eli swallowed back a defensive retort. Grief had struck harder than usual that morning, and he had worked it from his system in a grueling run that had been made worse by Arizona's dry heat. "I was just working on my pacing." He was a terrible liar, and from Nico's narrowed gaze, he hadn't fooled him one bit.

They walked in silence until they came to a lookout protected by a railing.

“I always wanted to come here,” mused Nico. “We never did the Grand Canyon as a family trip. I don’t think my parents would have survived trying to keep eight children from falling in.”

“Oh God, no.” Eli shuddered. “Is it everything you thought it would be?”

Nico nodded, and his throat bobbed. His eyes softened as he took in the majesty of the natural landmark. “It’s so much more. I feel so insignificant.” He let out a surprised huff at his own words. “It’s almost peaceful.”

*Insignificant.* The singular word struck Eli between the eyes like an arrow, a summary of every emotion he’d felt recently wrapped up in five innocent syllables. Against his will, a strangled noise escaped.

Nico turned sharply, his eyes filled with concern. “Eli?”

“I—I—” Eli inhaled, and a tear streaked down his cheek. “I’m so tired of being insignificant.”

“Oh, honey.” Nico reached for him.

For a split second, Eli wanted to resist, to wipe away the past thirty seconds as a fluke, and pretend to be happy-go-lucky Eli again. But Nico’s embrace was warm and safe, and for the first time in weeks—no, years—Eli gave himself permission to feel hurt. Hurt and sad and betrayed and angry, so very angry. And with hurt came tears, and with tears came sobs that racked his body, until he was gasping for air and relief.

And Nico simply held him while he cried and cried and cried. His parents had left him behind. Audrey had left him behind, the world

had moved on without him, Nico would soon abandon him, and the only fucking thing he could do now was *cry*.

When his sobs slowed to weak sniffles, Nico said, “I’m so sorry. I was being philosophical. I meant insignificant like a single grain of sand, or a single star in the sky, or something existential like that.”

“I know.” Eli rubbed his sore eyes. “You’re very good at the philosophizing and metaphor...izing.”

“Come on.” Nico rubbed down his arm one more time, and then took his hand, tugging him forward.

“No,” Eli said, pulling his hand back and hugging himself. “Let me be sad, right here by this—” He glanced around. “This rock. This sad, sad, rock.”

Nico bit back an obvious smile. “I’m going to let you, just not here.”

Eli let himself be led to the railing that overlooked the canyon.

“Here.”

“Yeah?” Eli sniffled. “It’s a canyon. Some might say it’s a grand one.”

“Come on,” said Nico fondly. “Go on then. Scream.”

Eli tilted his head. “What?”

Nico waved a grandiose gesture at the rocks surrounding them. “Scream. Into the canyon.”

“I don’t understand.”

Nico screwed his face tightly, took in a breath, and screamed into the canyon.

Eli nearly jumped out of his skin, and realization struck. “I’m not doing that! Someone will hear us. Nope, nope, nope.” He whirled



around, intent on returning to Esmeralda.

Nico caught Eli's arm, his mouth widening in a smile that was both wicked and irrationally sexy. "You, dear Eli, are practically homeless."

Eli sighed, and opened his mouth to yell. All that came out was a strangled squeak that sounded like "Ah?"

Nico raised a dark slash of an eyebrow. "You don't have a job."

Clearly, Nico wasn't dropping this until he gave in. Eli sucked in air until his lungs would surely burst. And then, he screamed.

And it felt *good*. His eyebrows raised and his cheeks heated.

Nico smiled and leaned against the railing. "Your fiancée left you at the altar."

*My fiancée did leave me at the altar!* Eli roared and shouted, imagining the pain and suffering leached away by the sound ricocheting around the rocks. He spun to Nico and poked him in the sternum. "Your leg will never be the same."

Nico's eyes widened, and Eli thought perhaps he had gone too far. But then that vivaciously villainous smile appeared again just before Nico turned to the expanse and bellowed out his rage. He snapped his head to Eli. "Your father left before you ever knew him."

Eli hollered, his voice rasping at the end of it. "You'll probably have chronic pain for the rest of your life."

Nico screamed, his hand cupped around the side of his thigh where one of his pitted scars lay just below his clothing. "Your mother is dead."

And she was, wasn't she? Something crumbled and cracked inside Eli, and he wasn't sure if it was his own heart or the wall

against grief that he'd put up on the day she'd died. He yelled and raged into the canyon, every second of the sound representing an unsaid pain.

*I wasn't ready to be an orphan. I'll never be ready. Bring her back.*

He shouted until it felt like another scream would wring blood from his vocal cords. He pressed his forehead against Nico's sweat-dampened shoulder. Nico clasped the back of his neck with his wide hands until Eli sobbed out, "Well, you snore."

The vibrations from Nico's laugh rolled from his shoulder into Eli's core. His attempted scream broke off into choked chuckles until he rumbled, "You leave toothpaste all over the counter."

Eli stepped back and bowed ceremoniously before taking a running leap toward the railing. The scream was broken by gleeful snorts before he gasped, "Your choice of music is terrible."

"It's NPR! Fine." Nico bellowed again, his voice cracked and hoarse. "I keep tripping over your running shoes."

Eli yipped out a light half-holler. Then he twirled and jumped with all the grace of a newborn deer, and pointed at Nico. "And *you* have an unhealthy relationship with Pop-Tarts!"

Nico slammed his hands on the railing, throwing his head back in a warrior's cry that turned into a majestic howl. Eli joined him, and together, they faced the one of the great wonders of the natural world, baying like the proudest alpha wolves. They howled away panic and fear, grief and happiness, car accidents and broken promises. Tears of laughter and tears of sorrow mixed together like

painted primary colors on Eli's cheeks before they were dashed away by the bracing breezes.

"Is everything alright over here?" a voice sounded from behind them. A park ranger walked toward them hesitantly, his hand around a walkie-talkie.

Eli's shout died to a tiny "ahh-woo" under his breath.

Nico stopped his howl and coughed into his fist before addressing the wary ranger. "Yes, sir," Nico said, flashing a charming smile. "Everything's fine. I just told him how season seven of *Game of Thrones* ended."

The ranger's shoulders relaxed. "Ah, well, I think we all felt that way. Maybe keep it down though?" He gave a dismissive nod and turned back toward his truck.

Eli took a tentative step back toward the parking area, but Nico reached out and snagged his wrist. He pulled Eli toward him until they were face-to-face, foreheads touching, their chests heaving from the exertion of shouting out their sorrows. He caught Eli's jaw in his broad hands, his thumbs wiping away the last remnants of tears.

"You are not insignificant to me." Nico dipped his head to Eli's lips, showing him the unconditional truth of his words in a single kiss. And there, in a place of wonder visited by millions of creatures for millions of years, Eli felt very significant indeed.

\* \* \*

“I feel we should be waiting for Mufasa’s ghost to speak any moment,” said Eli as they lay on an old plaid blanket under the stars.

“Simba...” murmured Nico in a deep voice as he squinted at the cosmos. Their tent was set up a few feet away, but the night sky over the Grand Canyon was too beautiful to stay inside, even though the temperature had dropped as soon as the sun disappeared.

“You’ve barely been able to use your fancy bed setup,” said Eli, glancing at the parked van. “It’s been all hotels and tents.”

Nico bit back a smile. “I’m not sure the two of us would fit in a twin bed.”

“Sure we could.” Eli tilted his head back and forth, measuring Nico’s size. “You can be the big spoon, and if you put your elbow here, and I twist my hip this way—” he started to demonstrate like an enthusiastic Twister player before Nico took his hand with a snort.

“I’m fine with the tent,” Nico said. “I like holding you without having to resort to geometry to make it work.” He tugged the old duvet over their legs until they were covered from the waist down, providing ample warmth for stargazing.

Eli clutched at the edge fondly. It wasn’t too long ago that he’d curled up underneath it, exhausted, embarrassed, and lonely, and woken up in a garage in Chicago.

“Are there any ballads about the night sky you can recite?” he teased, snuggling closer to Nico’s arm.

Nico gave him a thoughtful look. “Maybe ‘Fly Me to the Moon.’”

“Did you just use my own joke against me?”

“All’s fair in ballads and war.” Nico tapped his chin. “The first thing that comes to mind is, ‘But I am constant as the Northern Star, of

whose true fixed and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament.”

“Barbra Streisand?”

Nico jabbed at his upper arm. “William Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*. I don’t usually teach Shakespeare, and it’s not a poem, but I like the quote.”

“I do too.” Eli looked up at the star, which twinkled as if it knew they were discussing it. “What does it mean? I read *Julius Caesar* in high school, but at that age, if it didn’t appeal to my raging hormones, I generally didn’t pay attention.”

“Well, these words are spoken by Caesar just before his assassination, when some characters come to beg for amnesty for another character. Caesar says he won’t change his mind, and that he’s a guy who refuses to be swayed once he’s made up his mind.” Nico gazed up at the stars, his brow furrowed.

Eli stole the chance to study his profile, strong and steady as the North Star itself.

Nico’s eyes widened in some lost realization, and he turned to Eli slowly. “Shakespeare is also saying that the North Star is so steady and true that it ‘has no fellow in the firmament.’” He reached out his hand and traced Eli’s jaw. “That the star has no equal in the sky.”

Something passed between them, something electric and shivery that Eli wanted to grasp ahold of, but within an instant, it was gone, replaced by a sardonic smile on Nico’s face. “But then, of course, right after that, a bunch of angry senators kick his ass.”

Eli scrunched his nose. “I don’t think my high school teacher stated it quite like that.”

“I’m paraphrasing.”

“It’s weird that this is the same star that millions of people have used to navigate throughout the centuries. And now, here we are.”

“Here we are.”

Eli rolled over and ran his fingers through Nico’s hair, letting the silken strands slip from his fingers and fan across his forehead. He stopped just shy of Nico’s temple and stroked the waxen scar that snaked through his waves, obscured by the length of his hair.

Nico shifted, uncertainty written across his face, but Eli continued to trace the paler strip of skin, over and over.

“Don’t,” Nico said, stilling Eli’s movements by grasping his wrist. “It’s from my car accident.”

“I like it.” Eli gently plucked Nico’s fingers from his wrist and began stroking Nico’s imperfect hairline once more. “It makes you a bit like sexy Frankenstein.”

Nico’s entire body stiffened, and his eyes closed, lips pressed thin.

Eli groaned internally. *Well done. Scar insults are so very romantic.*

Nico’s eyes blinked open, and he let out a frustrated sigh. “I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt, and assume you mean Frankenstein’s *monster*. The doctor’s name was Frankenstein, not the monster.”

“Oh God,” Eli murmured, relieved that Nico wasn’t upset. “I love it when you talk literary to me.” He gasped as Nico’s wide hands grasped his waist and flipped their position so that he lay on top of

Eli, his weight pressing down with a delicious pressure. An evil smile spread across Nico's face as he lowered his mouth to Eli's ear.

"At first, the green light in *The Great Gatsby* stands for his hopes and love for Daisy," Nico purred. "And later evolves to represent the impossible, unattainable dream."

"So sexy," whispered Eli, his breath hitching as Nico lifted Eli's shirt over his head and tossed it aside. He pressed a kiss to the tender, u-shaped hollow between his collarbones. "Nihilistic, but so sexy."

"Hester Prynne's scarlet letter A—" *A kiss to the flat of his sternum.* "First represents sin—" *A tweak of one nipple.* "And adultery—" *A bite to the other, while hands slide shorts down writhing hips.* "But then it symbolizes her angelic behavior toward the end of the book." *A gripped hand performing less-than-angelic behavior.*

"More, please, more," begged Eli, completely aware that this was absolutely ridiculous and loving every minute of it.

"Rosebud," Nico breathed, nuzzling against the crook of Eli's thigh, "was the name of his sled."

"Oh, god, that's—" Eli paused and lifted his head. "Wait. That's not a book, that's *Citizen Kane*."

Nico shrugged. "My brain has stopped working." And with a clever flick of Nico's tongue, Eli's brain stopped working too. His last coherent thought was to grab one of the pillows and tuck it under Nico's left leg. Snuggled under the bumpy lumps of an old duvet, they tore each other apart and built each other right back up again. And over their laughing and moaning and praying that there were no

scorpions hiding nearby, the North Star watched over the sky, the canyon, and the two lovers, smiling her bright celestial smile.



# Chapter 16

A day later, Nico's phone rang as they were eating stale cereal in Styrofoam bowls from the complimentary breakfast in the hotel lobby.

"Should I answer it?" asked Eli. "Since your family loves talking to me."

Nico laughed into his knockoff Cheerios and checked the screen. His smile faded. "Nah, it's my sister. I better talk." He swiped on the phone and stood, hovering near the room's closet. "Hello?"

"Hey," said his sister, Lettie, in a tired voice.

"What's wrong?" asked Nico, instantly on alert.

"You can tell already?"

Nico's heartbeat began to ramp up. "What's wrong? What's happening? Is Gigi hurt?"

Lettie laughed. "She's fine. Chewing on the side of my couch, but it's just upholstery fabric, so she's fine. I didn't realize how much children chew on things. They're all sticky hands and glommy jaws."

His shoulders, which had ratcheted up like a car jack, relaxed. "You make parenthood so appealing."

"I know," she said, ending on a snuffle.

His voice softened. "What's up, Lettie?"

She took a deep breath, and then let Hurricane Lettie out in a flood of words. “I’m going to lose the farm. And I know it’s so cliché—I sound like a damn Steinbeck novel—but it’s true. I’m behind on the mortgage and I can’t keep up with the work and I’m going to lose my farm. It’s mine, and I’m going to lose it.”

“Lettie, slow down. What happened?”

“Nothing just *happened*,” she hiccuped shakily. “It’s just the culmination of so many factors. I—”

And she began to cry harder. Nico listened as carefully as he could, barely breathing for fear he’d miss a word amidst the sobs and sniffles.

“If I hadn’t gotten pregnant, I’d have been able to put all the time and effort into it, but I did, and I just can’t manage everything alone now, and I had so many ideas and they’re all gone and I’m barely breaking even on expenses alone and I’m just so tired...and then I feel guilty because I love my baby but it’s just so much...”

She continued to sob, and Nico let her, waiting only until the sound had died down before speaking. “Have you talked to anyone else?”

“No, I just needed to talk to someone.”

He ran through solutions in his head. “I might be able to spare some money. I don’t have a lot.”

“No, I know that. I’ve seen that van you’re driving.”

He sniffed in mock objection. “Hey, now. Esmeralda is a lady and I will not have you disrespecting her like that.”

“I’m so sorry to have offended your mechanical girlfriend.” Laughter was poking through her muffled words like sunshine

through a waning rain cloud.

“Look, here’s what we’re going to do. Why don’t you ask Lucy and Jack for some money to cover the late payments, and I’ll start drafting some ideas to get the farm back on track. I can call you when we get to the hotel in Santa Monica with my ideas. It’ll be a few days, but I’ll get it done.”

There was a long pause. “Oh. Nico, you don’t have to—”

He interrupted her. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’ll be like planning out a lecture, except with vegetable beets instead of poetic beats.”

She laughed. The sound was watery and tearlogged, but more relaxed than earlier. “That was terrible. But I’ll think about it. I guess I just needed to get it off my chest. Where are you today?”

Nico let her obvious subject change go. “We’re done with the Grand Canyon, so we’re back in Flagstaff. We’ll check out some things here and then head to Kingman.”

“Oh yes,” she said. He could hear the sly smile in the tone of her voice. “‘We’re back in Flagstaff.’ How’s your completely platonic passenger?”

“He’s fine,” said Nico, glancing to where Eli had flipped both his Styrofoam cup and bowl and was trying to build some sort of tower with them.

“Does he *flag your staff*—”

Nico choked, and she broke out into laughter. “Oh, look at the time,” he said flatly without looking at any timepiece. “We have to be on the road. Goodbye, Lettie.”

“Mmhmm,” she hummed, sounding like his insufferable sister once more. “Have fun. I hope you let him *king your man*.”

“That one doesn’t even make sense. Goodbye, Lettie.” He ended the call and flopped down in the hard-backed chair across from Eli.

“Everything okay?” asked Eli, balancing his spoon atop his makeshift tower.

“My sister’s behind on her mortgage,” Nico said, stirring his cereal without taking a bite. “She’s worried she’ll lose the place.”

“That’s awful,” said Eli.

It was awful, and Nico felt that wretched tightness start coiling inside him. In an attempt to keep it at bay, he scooped up a spoonful of cereal and put it in his mouth, only to feel his throat constricting. The cereal was no longer little circles of compressed oats. It was coarse rock and splintered wood scraping against the rigid muscles of his throat. With an effort that nearly made him gag, he swallowed the food and laid the spoon on the table, schooling his features.

“What triggers it?” he heard Eli say above the pounding in his ears. He had expected pity when he met Eli’s eyes, but instead, Eli was studying him with a calculated look.

“I think it’s when I’m nervous,” said Nico. He looked away, embarrassed. “I didn’t think you had noticed.” Eli made a noncommittal sound, and Nico’s cheeks burned.

“Do the milkshakes help?” asked Eli.

Nico froze in place, confused. “The ones you put on your Instagram?”

It was Eli’s turn to blush. “I might have started getting them because I noticed you were having trouble.” He bit his lip. “I figured, it was easy calories. Maybe not the healthiest calories, but it was something.”

Nico's eyes stung, and his throat tightened further. His stomach joined in, an acidic harmony to his staccato heartbeat. "So you were just getting me to eat."

"Yeah. Um, if you weren't standing at the counter with me, I'd have the server make yours a little thinner, in case it was a texture thing." Eli's jaw tensed. "Are you mad at me?"

Nico closed his eyes. His pride wanted him to be mad. His pride instructed him to roar out his competence from the nearest mountaintop, that he didn't need anyone's help to do something as simple as *eating*, thank you very much. But somewhere inside, a scared little boy told him to reach out his hand, and that's who he decided to listen to. He stretched out his fingers, and Eli caught them up in his. Nico focused on the feel of Eli's skin, the coarse fingertips, the bump of his knuckles. His muscles relaxed, his jaw unlocked, and his stomach went back to doing whatever stomachs did in their spare time.

Opening his eyes, he said, "No, I'm not mad. Not at you."

Eli blew out a relieved exhale. "Good. Good. Um, if you're okay talking about it, I have some ideas." At Nico's nod, he brightened and said, "Then it's time to do a little shopping."

\* \* \*

Eli drove them to a local grocery store. They shared a cart, because it would be silly to use two carts, but the sight of it made Nico happy. He wouldn't admit it of course, but that sappy smile that spread over

his face was all grocery cart-created. It was so easy to imagine the two of them together, picking out their weekly groceries and bringing them back to his house. Maybe they would cook dinner together, and then talk about their days at the garage or the university. Then Nico would grab one of his favorite poetry books, and read to Eli until he fell asleep in his arms.

It was a good dream, but still—it was only a dream.

Pushing the cart with the enthusiasm of a husky on their first sled race, Eli wound around the store, picking up various items and tossing them into the basket. When they got to the health and first aid section, he stopped, linking his arms in Nico's. "Let's strategize," he said, pulling some items from the cart. "There are days where eating is fine, right?"

"Yes," conceded Nico. "There are days when I'm not so nervous." Rare days, but they did exist.

"So really, what we want is plan B food," Eli said, pacing the aisle. "I've got several cans of broth, and a few bags of egg noodles. That way, if you're feeling a bad day coming on, you can cook up the broth with the pasta. Egg noodles stay pretty soft. And if it's a worse day, you can strain out the noodles and drink the broth. Make sense?"

Nico was dumbstruck, but Eli seemed to take his silence as assent. "On the really bad days, we can pick up some nutrition shakes. They don't need to be refrigerated, and they're easy to sip over a period of time. And we can add them to milkshakes or smoothies if needed to."

Nico grasped the edge of the shopping cart. His head felt like it was filled with cotton and his chest felt tight, but not like it did with his panic attack. It felt itchy and strained, like a muscle that needed stretching.

“Nico?” asked Eli, his voice gentle. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. “Just keep talking, okay?”

“Alright.” Eli lifted out some other items. “If the anxiety is hitting you hard enough that you’re nauseated, we’ve got some items from the BRAT diet.”

“Like Rob Lowe?” Nico tried to joke, but it came out breathy and wispy.

“That’s the Brat Pack, not the BRAT diet. You’ve got bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast. Toast we can manage at campfires, or at some of the continental breakfasts at hotels. Rice is a little harder, but doable with your cooking supplies. Bananas we just have to watch for spoilage, and applesauce is easy-peasy. Plus, it comes in strawberry, as all good things do.”

The applesauce crashed to the floor as Nico pulled Eli close, wrapping his arms around him. “Why am I about to cry?” Nico asked. “I never cry.”

“Why not?” asked Eli. His face was smushed against Nico’s neck, but he was still audible. “It’s not a masculinity thing, is it?”

“No, of course not,” sniffled Nico. “It’s just not how I usually show emotion. Especially in public.” A single tear rolled down his cheek, and he wiped at it, staring at his finger with amazement. “It’s a fucking tear. I’m crying in the middle of the grocery store. What is wrong with me?”

“To be fair, food prices have gotten pretty high, so I’m sure you’re not the only one.” Eli stroked the back of Nico’s neck. “You know what I think it is?”

“What?” Another tear dared to fall, streaking down the other cheek.

“I think this is the first time in a long time you’ve allowed yourself to be taken care of,” said Eli. “I think sometimes you get so caught up in being the hero that you shy away from other people helping you. Even when you were hurt, I don’t think you allowed yourself to accept the help that was given. You took it, but you didn’t like it.” He brushed a third tear from Nico’s face. “I think you like this. I think you like me taking care of you.” His eyes were wide as he spoke, as if he was realizing this right along with Nico.

Nico sniffled, pulling one arm away from the embrace to wipe at his nose. “Why don’t they have complimentary tissues in each aisle?”

Eli tutted and ran a hand through Nico’s hair. “Baby, I’ll talk to the manager about it. In the meantime, let’s go find the tissues and then we’ll get a milkshake at that cute place next door. What kind do you want?”

Nico closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Something lifted away from his soul, a misplaced sense of responsibility. It wasn’t fully gone, but it was diminished for the time being. When he opened his eyes, he gazed at Eli with a renewed trust. “You know what? Surprise me.”



# Chapter 17

The Black Mountains of Arizona were misnamed, in Eli's opinion. The ground was a sandy taupe, sparsely dotted with coarse foliage as prickly as his mood. Beyond that, the mountain range jutted into the sky, the jagged, striated guardians of the high desert. They were mostly plain old brown and green, not black, like the inside of Eli's heart.

Melodramatic self-pity was not a good look on Eli, but he was allowed to indulge in it today, of all days. If he wanted to equate his surroundings to the dark crevasses of his current mood, he would do it with the force of all his inner grumpiness, and more power to him.

He scowled at the closest mesa. It was flat and rocky, like his heart. Okay, maybe his metaphors were running dry.

"Your face will stick like that if you keep frowning," said Nico.

"Says the King of Frowns." Eli crossed his arms. "Where are we going, and why won't you tell me?"

Nico stretched one arm over his head, keeping the other on the steering wheel, before reversing the action with the other arm. "Because I don't want to tell you."

"I could just look it up online," Eli pointed out, waving his phone.

“You’re going to look at all the tourist attractions in the state of Arizona and figure out which one it is?”

“I have superior powers of deduction.” Eli pulled up a browser search, but Nico grabbed his wrist. He bussed Eli’s tense knuckles, and then kept hold of his hand, either out of affection or to keep Eli away from the power of Google.

“I promise you’ll like it,” Nico said. “Be patient. Look out the window. Maybe you’ll see one of those Gila Monster Crossing signs.”

“I’ll cross your Gila monster,” grumbled Eli, which made no sense, but he didn’t care. He was declaring today International Eli Pouting Day. He was all sunshine and lollipops the rest of the year, so he was allowed this one twenty-four-hour period of sulking and angst.

“That’s where we’re going,” said Nico, dropping Eli’s hand to point at a little brown sign.

“Oatmeal?” Eli grimaced. “I hate oatmeal.”

“Not Oatmeal. Oatman. It’s a tiny, historic mining town.”

“What about me says that I would love a tiny historic mining town? Do I usually have coal streaked across my face?”

“Lord, your mood.” Nico whistled through his teeth and shook his head. “I’m not taking you because of the mining part.”

A handful of buildings appeared on the horizon minutes later, and Eli’s interest perked up. “It’s so small!”

“It’s a ghost town, sort of. I’m not sure how many tourists elevate it out of ghost status, but it gets lots of visitors.” Nico tapped the brakes, slowing behind a line of vehicles that vastly outnumbered the buildings. He pulled off the road and parked in the sandy area on the side of the road behind dozens of tourists with the same idea.

“It’s charming,” conceded Eli. Stretching his legs outside the van, he glanced up and down the main street, admiring the clapboard buildings and old wooden sidewalks. Booths sold everything from original art to tie-dyed blankets. Enough tourists laughed and smiled to pierce through his dark mood, if only a little.

He reached down to touch his toes, groaning at the ache in his lower back. Switching between running and sitting in the van was hell on his muscles if he didn’t stretch often. As he knelt over, sifting a bit of the grainy sand through his fingers, a nuzzling touch bumped his hip.

“Nico,” he hissed. “We’re in public!”

“Huh?” said Nico, his voice sounding far away—too far away to perform any sort of PDA. Eli froze and turned slowly to meet his attacker. A gray-brown and white burro with glossy eyes and eyelashes to melt the darkest of hearts gazed up at him.

“Eep,” said Eli, unable to verbalize the explosion of cuteness in his brain. The burro snuffled at his pockets, foraging for food. “Oh my God. Hello, love muffin. Hello, precious. I just want to squish your beautiful face.”

Arms wrapped around his middle, and he was pulled back against a warm, safe chest. “Happy birthday,” murmured Nico in his ear.

Eli stiffened, whirling around. “You—I—what—how?”

“Don’t stammer; you’ll scare the burro,” teased Nico, pressing a kiss to Eli’s forehead. “And if you recall, you told me your birthday when chastising me for being concerned about your age.”

“And you got me a donkey in return?” Eli yelped. The burro nickered behind him, bumping his hip again in a never-ending quest for leftovers.

“We’ll call it a Birthday Burro Experience, how’s that?” said Nico. He turned to the donkey, giving him a tentative pat. “Can I have my...Eli back?” The burro headbutted his pocket. “I’ll consider that permission.”

*My Eli?* It was probably a slip of the tongue, but even so, that simple phrase was an even better birthday gift than a town full of lovable wild burros. Nico threaded their hands together, and as he led Eli to the first shop full of burro-themed souvenirs, Eli’s dark mood melted away.

\* \* \*

The painted sign hanging from the side of the two-story adobe building read, “Oatman Hotel, Restaurant-Bar-Package Goods’ in swirled, stylized letters. If Nico closed his eyes, he could just imagine the sign’s original creator, pushing away curious burros nipping at his horsehair paint brushes while he added the finishing touches. The sign said more than what was written in faded vintage lettering. The sign said *welcome back*, and *we’ve missed you*, and *yes, we’re probably haunted, but come in anyway and stay a while*.

“There’s a restaurant inside,” said Nico, tugging Eli into the crook of his arms. He found himself doing this more and more, pulling Eli closer whether they were in bed or simply in a gas station picking up

cheap cappuccinos before that day's journey. It was ridiculous behavior for a fling with an end date, but he did it anyway. When Eli was near, he felt his entire body relax, like a frozen waterfall reveling in the first glimpse of springtime sun. "Fair warning, it's supposed to be haunted, and you were a little jumpy on that ghost tour."

"Whatever," said Eli. "I just had extra energy from being in the van all day. I wasn't jumpy at all."

Nico gave him an indulgent but disbelieving smile. "Well, this should be better. Clark Gable and Carole Lombard spent their honeymoon here. Allegedly, it's their ghosts haunting the place. So unless movie stars really scare you, you should be good." He leaned closer to the shell of Eli's ear and murmured, "Some say you can still hear them laughing and whispering in the rooms."

Eli shivered and shoved Nico away. *Extra energy, my ass.* Still, Nico rather liked the idea of Clark and Carole haunting a town that meant so much to the famous lovers. If the afterlife meant playing poker with the ghosts of miners past and laughing with the love of his life, Nico would take it. Maybe he would haunt the campsite on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. Laying on a blanket under the stars with Eli would be—

Nico shook that thought away. Flings certainly did not include afterlife speculation. "Come on, let's go inside."

Eli made a little surprised sound as they entered the bar and restaurant. The walls were covered in one-dollar bills signed by tourists. It felt like being inside a wasp's papery hive, but more accommodating and with less chance of allergic reactions. The host

led them to a table with a crisp gingham tablecloth, and handed them a simple laminated menu.

“What do you think?” asked Nico, gesturing to the busy restaurant.

“I think we go to a lot of places where we have to sign things,” said Eli. “But I like it.” His eyes lowered to the menu as he mumbled, “Thank you for this. For all of this. You didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to.”

Eli fiddled with his silverware before blurting, “I hate my birthday.”

Nico froze. He wasn’t expecting that reaction. “I’m sorry. Should I not have—”

Eli waved him away impatiently. “No, no. It’s just...it’s so quiet. Everyone who used to call me is dead. And that sounds so pathetic, but the whole day, it’s this silent reminder that they’re gone. My grandparents would call, but they’ve been gone for ten years. And then my mom, and she’s been gone—” He stopped, his eyes glassy with unshed tears. “Anyway, I had planned on just ignoring it completely. I didn’t want to face the silence today.” He traced a roughened patch on the tablecloth with the edge of his fingernail. “Thanks for making it not so quiet.”

Nico bit his lip to keep it from quivering, and blinked back an unwelcome salty sting in his eyes. Why the hell was he about to cry again? He wasn’t even sad! He was happy, so damn happy. His insides were a mess of shaken jelly and every heartbeat was like the bang of a starter pistol, signaling the race of a lifetime between lust, adrenaline, and love—

He dropped the menu as realization brought all of his senses to a screeching halt. He was falling in love with Eli. *He was falling in love with Eli.*

“Anyway.” Eli cleared his throat and smacked the table as if to wipe away the emotion that had spilled from his mouth. “I’m getting a hot dog.”

*He’s getting a hot dog.*

Nico’s entire world was breaking and reforming, a messy continental drift of every belief, every idea he’d subscribed to, every emotion he’d felt in nearly four decades of this life, and *Eli was getting a goddamned hot dog.*

“A hot dog sounds great,” said Nico hoarsely, because a hot dog did sound great. In fact, everything was great. Everything was wonderful and full of delicious possibilities.

They ate their hot dogs, and afterward, they squished past other patrons and made their way to the wall, finding a coffee mug full of mismatched pens and markers. “Are you ready to sign our life away once more?” asked Eli. He added his initials and tossed the marker to Nico.

Nico stared at the sharp slashes of Eli’s handwriting before adding his own. Maybe he was in a lovestricken stupor and not thinking clearly, but their initials looked like they belonged together, simple sets of lines and arches and swirls that represented everything the two of them had become, all sketched neatly across George Washington’s forehead. While Eli left to pay for the meal, Nico hung the dollar between bills belonging to Hank and Nancy from South Dakota, and Fred Meddleston from Nashville. It fluttered

in the breeze from a nearby fan, and Nico felt nostalgic for a slip of paper that he was about to leave behind.

Behind him, he heard the faint chuckle of a man and the answering throaty laugh of a woman. It came from far away, but even at this distance, he could sense the pure happiness of two people who had found everything they would ever need in each other. In the dreamy fog of his peripheral vision, he saw shiny, slicked-back dark hair and a golden tumble of curls that bounced along with the laughter.

Nico picked up another pen, the dented plastic advertising a local dentist. Before he could overthink it, he stretched his arm toward where he had hung the bill and added a heart between their two initials. It was silly and juvenile, a sentimentality that had no place in a simple fling. But as he made his way toward Eli, who was already half out the door petting yet another burro, he found that frankly, he didn't give a damn.

\* \* \*

The afternoon was filled with feeding the burros, watching a mock gunfighter duel on Main Street, feeding the burros, shopping for silly souvenirs, and also, feeding the burros.

"I'll miss you all," proclaimed Eli to his audience of long-lashed, forever hungry donkeys. "Especially you, Rufus. You are a gem among equines."

The creature brayed at him, displaying yellowed, prominent teeth.



“That’s right, smile for me,” cooed Eli. He blew kisses to the burros before finally climbing behind the wheel with a contented sigh.

“Good birthday?” asked Nico, searching Eli’s face.

“The best,” assured Eli, throwing his muscle into turning Esmeralda’s ignition. The vehicle made a growly grinding noise and started, leaving Eli’s posse of burros behind in their desert kingdom.

Route 66 out of Oatman was strangely peaceful for being so desolate. The prickly foliage and red rocks and dirt that Eli had cursed just that morning were now perfect contrasts to the blue skies and gauze-like clouds. There wasn’t another car or town for miles. The only sound was the unobtrusive swoosh of the air conditioner, and the gentle hum of Esmeralda’s plodding engine, and—

“What’s that sound?” asked Nico, gripping the armrest.

“What sound?” asked Eli, and then his stomach sank. It was the sound of trouble, announcing its entrance onto the scene with a familiar *flap-flap-flap*.

“That would be a flat tire,” said Eli slowly. He held his right hand out to Nico. “You with me?”

Nico gripped his hand and let out a stuttered, “Y-yeah, I’m okay.”

Eli pulled over to the side of the road, hoping the shoulder was clear of snakes. He could handle a flat tire, but the thought of a rattlesnake bite made him instantly queasy.

“You stay here,” he said, reaching back to their cooler for water. “Drink this.”

Nico nodded and took the water bottle with unsteady hands. Eli went to the front driver’s side wheel and cursed when he saw the

damage. There wasn't a chance of limping anywhere on that tire. It had done its duty and was ready to move on to tire heaven.

"What's wrong?" asked Nico, coming around the front. Color had returned to his cheeks. "You look like someone stepped on your kitten."

"I told you to stay in the car," snapped Eli, running his fingers through his already sweaty hair.

"Another rare glimpse of Grumpy Eli. Is it that bad?" asked Nico with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm such an idiot," groaned Eli, kicking at the tire. "I didn't think to replace the spare after last time. We're screwed."

Nico grimaced. "It's my van. I should have remembered."

Eli rubbed his eyes. The dry heat made them itch. "You're a professor. I'm a mechanic. It's your job to explain *Ulysses*, and my job to remember car maintenance rules." He reached into his pocket for his phone. "I don't have a signal. You?"

Nico glanced at his own device. "None." He went to the back of the van and swung the doors wide. "Come sit. Someone has to show up at some point. This isn't a deserted road, just a quiet one."

Eli kicked the loosened tire again before flopping down next to Nico on Esmeralda's bumper. "Yes, let's wait here until we melt or have to battle a scorpion," he said sourly. "Maybe the U.S. Cavalry will show up, like at the end of all the Western movies."

Nico laughed and handed him a bottle of water. "Then we wait. Wanna play *I Spy* or something like that?"

"I spy something tall and annoying," mumbled Eli, bumping Nico's shoulder.

“And I spy something grumpy that just turned twenty-six. Game over.”

After a few sips from the ice-cold bottle that cooled down both his body and mood, Eli asked, “Do you ever wonder what it would have been like if we’d met in a normal way?”

Nico laughed. “I don’t think you and I could have ever met in the normal way.”

He had a point there. Nothing about them was normal. “Still. What if we’d gone on, I don’t know, a date?”

“A date? Where would we have gone?”

“Hmm, not sure. Can you eat at Italian restaurants, or are they not Italian enough for you?”

Nico rolled his eyes. “I’m not *that* Italian.”

“Nico, you stubbed your toe this morning and I swear you yelled out the lyrics to a Puccini opera.”

Nico poked him in the stomach. “*Cazzo, smettila di essere così carino, stella mia.*”

Eli threw up his hands in mock frustration. “Point made. We would go on a date to this Italian restaurant then. I’d wear a nice suit, and you’d be naked, because this is my fantasy story.”

Nico scoffed. “I’m not going to be naked at the Italian restaurant. Think of the sauce burns.”

“Oh, yeah. We don’t want the goods burned. You can wear a suit too, then.”

“Thank you, you’re so considerate.”

Eli gazed into the distance. Maybe if he willed another car into existence, it would appear. When no such miracle happened, he

continued. “And I’d say, ‘Hello, you must be Nico.’”

Nico’s smile became soft and lazy. “And I’d say, ‘Hello, weren’t you hiding in my van a minute ago?’”

Eli narrowed his eyes. “And you’d say, ‘Hello, you must be Eli.’ And I’d say, ‘My, you have the most handsome jawline I’ve ever seen.’”

Nico flushed. “I’d say, ‘Thanks, I just had it professionally trimmed. My hairdresser looks a lot like you.’ You know, with the most beautiful eyes in the entire world.”

Eli nearly dropped his water bottle, and even with his fumbled rescue, a quarter of the bottle drenched his shirt. The most beautiful eyes in the world? Where had that come from? His voice took on a new tremble when he said, “We’d sit down at our table, and you’d order wine, and I’d order every version of breadsticks on the menu. And then, maybe I’d hold your hand or something.”

He moved his hand closer to Nico’s, and the other man entwined their fingers together.

“What do you do for a living?” asked Nico. All pretense of their imagined conversation disappeared, and Eli could suddenly feel that imagined table between them. He could smell the pasta sauce in the air, hear the ethereal violin music, and taste the rich red wine.

“I’m a mechanic,” he said. “I’m currently looking for work. Does that bother you?”

“Not at all,” said Eli’s date. “Employment status and type doesn’t define a person.”

“What about you?”

“I’m a professor, on sabbatical. Not only do I get to do research I wouldn’t have done during a normal semester, but it happens that my sabbatical fell right during a recovery from a leg injury.”

“Oh?” Eli couldn’t focus on just one feature of Nico’s. His gaze bounced from his sleepy lashes to his long nose with an endearing bump in the middle, to his full lips that he knew as well as his own. “What happened to it?”

“Tried to hang glide off an elephant.”

The imaginary restaurant dimmed with a loud snort, and they were in the back of a van once more. “How creative,” said Eli. “I like that in a man. I think then we’d eat, and get to know all the basics. And then we’d leave the restaurant, and go for a walk in a nearby park, and you’d tell me stories about the North Star.”

Nico tugged him close enough that their shoulders touched. “This seems kinda familiar.”

Eli smirked at him. “And then maybe I’d get a headache, and you’d recite a poem for me from memory.”

“Very familiar.” Nico tugged at his bottom lip. “I think ‘The Highwayman’ by Alfred Noyes would work for a poetry reading under the stars.”

“What’s that one about?”

“A highwayman and a landlord’s daughter. Their love is forbidden, but they arrange to meet in secret after his next robbery. And he says,

*Then look for me by moonlight,*

*Watch for me by moonlight,*

*I’ll come to thee by moonlight, though hell should bar the way.”*

Nico's recitation voice was velvet and bourbon mixed with a panther growl. Eli shivered, fighting his body's instinct to swoon like a heroine in a Victorian novel. "Oh God."

"Right?" Nico waggled his eyebrows lewdly. "Of course, then she has to shoot herself so that the gunshot warns him away from a trap, but he ends up shot by a bunch of redcoats and dies. On the highway. Because he's a highwayman."

*Swoon canceled.* Eli peered at him. "Why are you the way you are?"

Nico's laugh echoed off the van's interior. "I like my melodramatic literature, what can I say?"

"How would our date end?" asked Eli.

"I think I'd say, 'wanna see my van?'" Nico waved his hands to show off the vehicle.

Eli buried his head in Nico's shoulder and sighed. "You sound like a predator."

"Sure, but as soon as you see how beautiful Esmeralda is, you swoon for me."

Eli pulled back. "Why am I the one swooning? Can't you swoon too?"

"Fine, we swoon at each other." Nico wrapped his index finger in Eli's damp shirt and tugged him back. "Much swooniness occurs. Then we kiss in the back of the van, kinda like this."

Their noses bumped, and Nico covered Eli's mouth with his own. It was soft and tender, and if he hadn't had the best first kiss of his life just a few days ago, this imagined meeting would be the best first kiss ever.

Nico pulled back. "That would have been a great first date."

"I think so too." He kissed Nico again, but Nico stiffened, his hands clamping onto Eli's arms.

"Do you hear that?" he mumbled against Eli's mouth.

Eli pulled back and cocked his head, frowning. "It sounds like... bees."

Nico gave him a long-suffering look. "The hell? It's not bees."

"I don't know! There's scorpions and snakes all over the place, maybe there are giant bees!"

The supposed bees were coming closer, but their buzzes and hums were much louder, much lower. Nico squinted off into the distance, and a slow grin spread across his face.

"Eli, sweetheart," he said, straightening his shirt. "The cavalry is here."

# Chapter 18

Nico had never particularly been into motorcycles. He enjoyed classic cars and the time period they represented, but he didn't have a need to reminisce about a better time period. He truly believed the human race improved with every generation, and to claim that "the good old days" were *better* was to swim backward against the current of innovation.

What he did like was the idea that they were a snapshot of time that he personally would never experience. It was the same way he felt about books. Driving a classic car or reading a classic book gave him a heady feeling of omnipotence, of being able to grasp the past and tug it into the present with a simple page flip or gear shift. It was a plausible form of time travel without going eighty-eight miles per hour in an inefficient car, or slingshotting around the world to steal humpback whales, as pop culture would have one believe.

That is, of course, until one wintry night, when his love of classic cars had been dashed on the trunk of a sycamore tree.

But when it came to motorcycles, Nico had no instinct pulling him toward their unique culture, no drive to polish their chrome and admire their wheels. So it was natural that he was more than a little



wary when at least two dozen motorcycles came their way, trailed by several pickup trucks and cars, like servants behind a royal family.

He stepped in front of Eli when the vehicles slowed to a halt, humming like Eli's aforementioned giant bees, with the occasional trademark *potato-potato-potato* sound of an idling Harley rising above the rest. The leader parked his bike a few feet from Esmeralda's bumper. He swung his leg over the seat, a modern-day cowboy resting his loyal steed.

His motorcycle was gorgeous. The chrome gleamed in the sunlight, sending starbursts reflecting into the cosmos. The paint was the color of an amethyst's heart, dark and glittering. Across the body, in thin red script like blood spilled from a wound, were three Latin words: *Deus Ex Machina*.

Nico forced his attention away from the bike and to the man in front of him. He was taller than Nico with broad shoulders framed by a leather vest. His arms were covered in intricate tattooed sleeves. Nico's first thought was of his sister, which was an odd comparison to a Harley rider, but Ariana had a tattoo sleeve of her own, and would have easily started up a conversation with this man in a bar about the style and history of every piece.

The second thing Nico thought was, *oh shit*. In his desperation, he had forgotten that motorcycle gangs had a certain lifestyle that preferred anarchy over law, chaos over calmness, and leather over cotton. He supposed if it came to violence, he could grab his cane and start whacking them around like a tall, angry Yoda, but it wouldn't do much good in the end.

“You boys in trouble?” the man said, his voice like gravel pitching over a cliff.

“We have a flat,” Eli said, his inherent sunshine shining from every syllable.

“A flat,” repeated the man, cracking his neck.

“Yes, a flat,” continued Eli, his speech off and running at its breakneck pace. “It’s the front driver’s side tire. Normally, I would have replaced the spare, but things got a little crazy after our last flat tire, and there was this velvet hotel, and I had to cut his hair, and you know, I probably should have picked up the new tire when I got the hair clippers, but it was early in the morning, and I’m not always at my best in the morning. And by the time we got to the sexy tornado, I had completely forgotten about it.”

The man stared at him with dark, heavy-set eyes. “Sexy tornado?”

“Um.” Eli flushed further, embarrassment adding rosy highlights to his sun-beaten skin. “Forget that part.”

“So.” The rider leaned closer. His long beard was threaded with silver, like little switchblades peeking out of a dark forest. “What are you going to do about it?”

Nico slid his hand onto the floor of the van, feeling for his cane. It looked like he would go out swinging after all. He tried to remember what he’d learned during his brief stint in Little League.

“Er...” Eli’s smile dropped into a puzzled puppy expression. “Do you have a phone we could use maybe?”

The man had just opened his mouth to say something that was most likely ominous when a woman’s voice rang out across the open

air. “Randall Renfro! Stop trying to intimidate civilians! We’re on a timeline!”

“I told you not to call me that when we’re on the bikes!” he yelled back. “My name is Skulls out here!”

“I don’t care if your name is Mickey Mouse! Be nice and don’t make us late!”

Instantly, the man’s severity melted away. Mr. Randall Renfro, also known as Skulls, rubbed at his neck and flashed a sheepish smile.

A woman came up from a bike parked a few feet behind Randall. She was short and pretty. Her tight, dark curls were tied back in an attempt to tame them, but a few had escaped anyway, framing her heart-shaped face. Freckles were sprinkled across her golden-brown cheeks and followed her scowl downward. She smacked Randall on the thigh and asked, “You boys need help?”

“We’ve got a flat,” began Eli. “You see, I forgot to—”

Randall cut him off. “There was a sexy tornado or something. They don’t have a spare.”

She raised a thin eyebrow. “Sexy tornadoes? Sounds fun.” She threw out a hand. “I’m Wendy Miller.” A soft smile slid across her face as she looked up at Randall. “Wendy Renfro in six hours.”

“Ahhh, congratulations!” said Eli, as if he’d known Wendy all his life.

“Where are you headed?” Randall asked, the growl in his voice tamed like a domesticated tiger.

“We were going to stay the night in Barstow,” answered Nico. “Maybe find a cheap hotel or something.”

The bride's eyes lit up. "Perfect! We're headed that way ourselves. We've got a block of rooms and a reception hall at one of the hotels there. Come join us and we'll give you a tow."

"That sounds great!" said Eli, tension falling from his shoulders.

"Eli!" hissed Nico, just as Randall growled, "Wendy!" Randall met Nico's eyes and they shared a sympathetic *I know, right?* look with each other.

"Oh, calm down," said Eli, batting at Nico's lower arm. He turned to Randall. "Look, I just have to ask, are you guys serial killers?"

Randall frowned. "No, why? Do you need one?"

Eli's consequential smile was blinding in the Arizona sun. "I think we're going to get along just fine."

\* \* \*

The bride wore white. The groom wore leather. Nico and Eli wore the last clean shirts and jeans they had, and thanked the gods above that the hotel had a laundry service.

Their tow into Barstow had gone without a hitch, pun unintended. Nico had grown tense when Randall mentioned riding on the back of one of the motorcycles, so Eli had come up with the idea to ride along in one of the trucks instead. They had climbed into the pickup of a man named Blade, but on weekdays, was called Tony Simms and worked as an independent contractor accountant. The truck bed was filled with the riders' suitcases, and the cab was soon filled with stories of motorcycle club shenanigans and Route 66 memories.

Though Randall and Wendy insisted it was their treat, Nico and Eli still helped set up the wedding as a trade for the free room and tow. Eli was shocked how much *fun* it was. He clowned around with guys named T-Bone and Horse as they lined up cheap folding chairs and wound paper streamers around a wobbly altar. Nico folded programs printed on a home computer while discussing favorite books with Wendy's aunt. Eli felt a twinge of sadness at opportunities lost. Was this what a wedding was supposed to feel like? If so, he would have traded the snooty wedding planner, bespoke suits, and thousand-dollar flowers for just a taste of what Randall and Wendy had.

The wedding was even more fun, if that was even possible. When Wendy appeared at the end of the aisle, she and Randall both burst into happy tears, as did half of the wedding party. Eli hadn't expected he'd ever be in the presence of a weeping motorcycle gang, but here he was, weeping right along with them.

Even when Randall dropped his wedding ring, sending Eli into the throes of *déjà vu*, it wasn't uncomfortable. Both the bride and groom laughed, and when he finally wriggled it on his finger, Randall glowed with pride and held his hand up for all to see. And when he bent Wendy over and kissed her, nearly stumbling in the process, every person in that room was filled with joy.

"Do you want to get married?" asked Nico as they rearranged the room for the reception, pushing folding chairs underneath newly installed card tables.

Eli dropped the two chairs he was carrying and gaped. "Do I what?" he asked, breathless, not from physical exertion, but the

spontaneity of the question thrown so casually his way.

Nico clapped a hand to his forehead. “Do you want to get married *again*?” he corrected. “Or, I guess, *finally* in your case.”

Eli let out a relieved exhale as he picked up the dropped chairs. “I don’t know,” he said. “With everything that’s happened, I think if I met the right person, I wouldn’t have to. We’d just belong to each other.”

Nico stopped straightening the paper tablecloth on one of the tables. “I like that. I think I’d feel the same.” He cleared his throat. “With the right person.” He met Eli’s gaze with an unrecognizable expression before turning away, focused on setting up the rest of the tables.

\* \* \*

The dancing at the reception kicked off with, naturally, “Born to be Wild.” It wasn’t necessarily the best choice to get down and boogie to, but the motorcycle club members all howled with glee and headed toward the makeshift dance floor.

“Do you want to join them?” Eli shouted over the music.

Nico shook his head. “No.”

“No, because of your leg?”

Nico’s mouth quirked on one side. “No, because I don’t like to dance.”

“Oh.” Eli’s brow furrowed, as if not liking dancing was an alien concept. “I guess that’s valid. Do you care if I...?”

Nico waved him toward the floor. "Go for it." He expected Eli to make a beeline for the other adults, but instead, he went to a little girl looking bored on the side of the floor. Nico thought perhaps it was one of Wendy's cousins, but he wasn't entirely sure. Eli bowed to the girl, and she curtseyed back before joining him on the dance floor. They swayed to the beat while holding hands, and before long, Eli was laughing and giggling as much as the girl. A toddler boy, no more than three years old, tugged at her dress, and Eli widened the circle to let him in. The trio bopped along, occasionally hopping. At one point, Eli was a maypole, and the two kids circled him until even Nico was dizzy from watching.

Nico felt a body sit in the chair next to him. "Your boy there is pretty awesome," said Randall, sipping at a glass of whiskey. "I think Wendy's grandmother is half in love with him already."

Nico glanced to where the elderly woman had stolen Eli from the children, her shaky hands clasped in his as they swayed to an old ballad. "I think we all are," said Nico before he could catch himself.

Randall flashed him a knowing smile. "You know," Randall continued, swirling the melted ice cubes in his drink. "I've led this club for twenty years, and I've loved every second of it. I make the final decisions. My rules protect the members. I am a goddamned leader, and it is awesome." He paused, and his smile became indulgent as he gazed at his bride. "But when this short stack of a woman brought me waffles at a diner one day, I looked at those cute freckles and all I wanted to do was *follow*. I wanted to follow her for the rest of her life, and have her follow me in return. I think that's what love is in the end. Finding that right person, that North Star you

want to follow for the rest of your fucking life.” Nico froze at the mention of the North Star, but Randall stood, a slight inebriated wobble in his step. “Now if you excuse me, my whiskey is gone, and I want to dance with my new wife.”

With half-focused eyes, Nico watched Randall take his new wife into his arms. Eli was his North Star, wasn't he? Who needed road maps and highway signs when that bright smile and affable laugh existed in this world? And with that, Nico finally made his decision.

Wendy's grandmother saw him walking towards them first. She smiled and leaned forward, whispering something into Eli's ear, and he spun to face Nico. His hair stood straight up, as if he'd been tearing his fingers through it, and his forehead was shiny with sweat. His mouth dropped, and his blue eyes went as wide as saucers.

He'd never looked so beautiful.

“My turn,” said Nico. He held out his hand.

Eli gaped at his trembling fingertips. “Yours?” asked Eli, his voice breathless. “I thought you hated dancing.”

“You make it look pleasant enough. We can skip the maypole dance, though.” Nico glanced at the fiddle player, who winked at him as she pressed her bow to the strings. Her hands, lined with age and memories, started an old song in three-quarter time as Eli laced his fingers through Nico's.

“Mr. Meyer.” Eli's mouth crept up at one corner. As the recipient of that impish smile, Nico surely had to be the luckiest person in the room.

“Mr. Tenney.” He positioned his hands at the slight indent of Eli's waist. The lead singer's voice filled the room with a haunting lilt like a



prairie angel, crooning about long-lost loves and dancing with one's darling.

"Alright then. Which one of us leads?" Eli's hands rested under Nico's elbows. The position was safe and warm. It said, *I won't let you fall*. Nico tightened his own grip to say, *And I won't let you go*.

"I've been trying to figure that out this entire trip."

On the downbeat, they took the first step toward something that was so much more than a dance. It was proof that this was more than a fling, more than a road trip. It was a *reckoning*.

Of course, it wasn't glamorous or talented. Nico was unaccustomed to dancing of any kind, and Eli was just plain clumsy. Stubbed toes and bruised shins couldn't stop the smiles that spread across their faces. Nico gazed at the clever sparkle in Eli's ocean-gray eyes, and knew that he was, in fact, absolutely in love with this man, and that he needed to tell him soon.

"Eli," he began. "I just want you to know that—I mean, I feel that we—"

He wished he had Eli's knack for blurting out whatever came to mind because in between his foolish, stuttered sentences, the vibrating buzz of a cell phone interrupted their dance.

"It's Jaime," said Eli, slipping the phone from his pocket just enough to peek at the screen. "Should I answer it?"

*No, no, no—* "Yeah, probably," said Nico, cowardice winning against any other instinct. "We'll be in Santa Monica tomorrow."

"Yeah." The phone pulsed again before Eli finally pressed the button and answered. He kept his hand in Nico's, and gently tugged him toward their table as he spoke. "Hey, Jaime," he said.

Nico's stomach soured.

"Really?...Of course, I can, but...when can I move in? ...And then I can... Jesus, you've never let me finish a sentence in your life, have you? ...That one doesn't count..."

As Eli continued to clarify the circumstances of his new beginning—a beginning that would take him away from Nico—the singer continued the beautiful waltz, but now the lyrics spoke of her darling being stolen away by her friend. How apt for the situation and Nico's breaking heart.

"Thank you, Jaime, I really appreciate it... I'll text you tomorrow with all the details." He ended the call, not meeting Nico's gaze. "They have a part-time opening at the shop, and the owner will even let me rent the connected apartment for a few months until I find something permanent."

"Oh," said Nico, his tongue as clumsy as his dance steps. "That's great."

*Stay with me. Come back with me. I'll dance with you every single day if you'll only be mine.*

A flash of inexplicable emotion crossed Eli's face before he sighed, and held out his hand. "One more dance?"

Nico took his hand, holding his tongue from any confessions of love. "One more dance."

\* \* \*

The hallway to their room was empty, but Eli felt like they were pushing through an entire crowd to get there. The air was dense with sexual tension, but it wasn't the same as their previous chemistry. Anticipatory pleasure was there, but it was tainted with a choking, bittersweet feeling of loss.

Nico pressed him against the hotel door as soon as it closed. Eli's clothes were gone in moments, like when a magician removes a tablecloth from underneath a full table setting. Nico kissed Eli over and over, little stamps of ownership dancing down his neck. Eli reversed their positions until Nico was held against the door instead, limbs outstretched and head held high like a martyr before a most delicious execution. Eli unbuttoned the taller man's shirt to reveal a broad chest and ribs that were finally filling in, and scars like fingerprints, so uniquely his own. He fell to his knees in front of Nico, a supplicant before a saint, swallowing him down in one motion. Nico let out the most unsaintly of curses as his head fell back against the door and one hand gripped the doorknob for dear life. Eli hoped it was locked or the hallway was about to get quite a show.

"Stop," Nico gasped, motioning impatiently for Eli's hand and yanking him to his feet. He pulled Eli tightly to his chest, as if he were something precious that only belonged to Nico. And maybe he was.

Hands and chests and groins met in rolling pinpricks of electricity, fiery and dangerous. Kissing was thrown to the wayside as Eli panted against Nico's shoulder. Nico's hand tripped down his backbone, and he laughed into his hair when Eli shuddered.

"That particular thoracic vertebra really does it for you?"

“Why do you even know the proper name, you weirdo? Get on with it,” said Eli, huffing in exasperation.

Nico teased his fingers downward, past his hip bones, and his finger brushed against that secret, sensitive spot. Eli tensed, and Nico paused, moving only to nuzzle into his neck.

“I’ve got condoms in my backpack,” he said. “If you’re ready.”

Eli could lie. He’d done it before. He could hold his tongue and make the experience all about Nico’s pleasure. But whatever it was growing between them, it didn’t include lies.

“I don’t do...that,” Eli said, lips against Nico’s collarbone.

“Would you rather top?” Nico asked without a single change in inflection because he was that wonderful and Eli was about to disappoint him again.

“No...I...” He took a deep breath. “I don’t do any of that. I just...I don’t like it.”

Nico pulled his hand away into a safer zone, and did an awkwardly delicious bumping of his nose against Eli’s forehead and cheekbones before taking his lips again. “Okay.”

Eli paused and drew back. “Okay?”

“Okay.” Nico nipped at his jawline, but Eli pulled away.

“Hang on. What do you mean, ‘okay’?” Nico frowned but Eli sped onward. “That’s not how this goes. This is the part where if you’re a guy, you say something snarky about me not being an actual gay man because I don’t like anal, and then I snark back that ‘I’m not, I’m actually bisexual, but that’s beside the point and also I’m not really into vaginal sex either,’ and then you say, ‘this is getting weird, are you saying we’re not fucking?’ And I say ‘yes,’ and you give me

another weird look and we give each other awkward and unsatisfying hand jobs and then you leave.”

Nico’s head tilted a little to the right, and he peered at Eli. “Eli, a good percentage of people don’t like anal sex. It’s not a be-all, end-all.”

“I know the statistics,” snapped Eli. “I know that not everyone likes it. I also know that 50% of marriages end in divorce, and 81% of people survive uterine cancer. I know these things, and guess what? The odds were still against me. I didn’t make it far enough through the marriage to get divorced, my mom died anyway, and every man I have ever been with has made me feel ashamed of what I like.”

And that, there, was the crux of the matter, wasn’t it? Of all the people in the world that had made him feel ashamed for being who he was, for liking what he liked, for attempting things he couldn’t do, he couldn’t bear it if Nico Meyer was one of them.

He started to speak again, but Nico’s broad hand covered Eli’s mouth and he let out a muffled yelp. He threaded his fingers into Eli’s and tugged him forward, not lowering his hand until they were at the end of the bed. He held Eli’s waist, a mimicry of their earlier dance, hand in hand and arm and arm and feet tripping feet, only now they were naked and trembling and so very vulnerable. Nico gazed down at Eli, who flinched against whatever pain was coming his way.

“I’m a very selfish person,” Nico announced.

And that was not what Eli had expected, nor was that a phrase one generally wanted to hear in the bedroom. His jaw dropped, but Nico reset it in place with his index finger.

“I’m a very selfish person, because I know I should hate every person that ever made you feel less than what you are. Every person that ever dismissed you and your needs and your feelings. I should hate myself because I know I’ve done the same. But every time they kicked you down, your star didn’t wink out of existence. Every push and shove made you shine brighter and brighter. And I am so fucking happy, so fucking honored, that I get to be the one to see all that brilliance shining out. So, please, trust me enough to make you glow. Shine for me, and believe me when I say how lucky I am to be here to see it.”

Eli swallowed back a lump in his throat. Nico made him feel beautiful. Nico made him feel precious. And above all, Nico made him feel *valid*, and that was a feeling he hadn’t experienced in a very long time.

“Now, Eli,” Nico said, his voice dark and husky, his hands wandering lower until they braced against Eli’s hipbone. “Get on the goddamned bed.”

Eli got on the goddamned bed.

Nico began to caress him, using hands and lips and tongue to light every nerve on fire until Eli was positively *illuminated*. In Nico’s hands, he felt like an ancient god kissed by lightning, something to be marveled at and worshiped. They stroked each other into a pleasurable abyss, and as he came, the only thought in Eli’s blissed-out mind was, *How do I keep you?*

# Chapter 19

And just like that, they were at the end.

Esmeralda's shocks groaned in protest as Nico guided her into a free spot near the famous Santa Monica pier sign, its neon letters dimmed in lieu of the abundant sunlight. Eli inhaled deeply, smelling fresh flowers and the occasional whiff of fried food. Above it all was the salty scent of the Pacific, the ocean breeze whispering a bittersweet message of finality.

"Do we go to the Route 66 sign first?" Eli asked, hoping Nico would say no. The sign was a big, obtrusive...well, *sign* that everything was over.

"Breakfast first," Nico said, tilting his head upward as a flock of seagulls passed over like a squawking thundercloud. "We have a special table reserved. Lucy and Jack are already there."

A reservation was probably a good idea, since it was Saturday morning and there were already tourists and locals alike milling around. Nico pulled up a map on his phone and gestured in the opposite direction.

Outside of the restaurant, they were close enough to hear the clattering dishes and low murmurs from customers on the deck, sounds that took Eli back to their first breakfast together. He wished

it were still that first breakfast, and they could relive this journey over and over like an ouroboros of Americana.

Nico grasped his shoulder, tugging Eli to a stop. He sighed, ruffling his hand through his dark hair. Eli's first, panicky thought was, *This is goodbye. He's cutting ties now so we don't have to later.*

"Here's the deal," Nico said. "My sister Lucy is different." He narrowed his eyes at Eli's look of confusion. "Good different. The best kind of different, but not everyone gets her." He averted his gaze to the ground. "If you say or do anything to hurt her, this ends here."

"Wh-what?" Eli was too shocked to point out that it was always going to end there. He'd seen Nico's overprotective attitude toward his family, but this was another level completely. His stomach tightened, and shame flagged pink splashes onto his cheekbones. "I would never. Never."

Nico opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again with an affirming head nod before moving forward toward the hostess stand. Eli followed, struck mute by the idea that Nico could even think he was capable of hurting anyone, let alone someone Nico loved.

Nico was all polite smiles again as he addressed the hostess standing under a blue and white sun umbrella. "We have a special table set up, under Vincent."

"Oh yes." She beamed at them, crossing off something on her clipboard. "The rest of your party is already here." She led them to an outdoor table that was tucked away behind a decorative screen,



kept comfortable and cozy by two hung fans blowing the ocean scent over them.

The two people at the table rose to their feet. Nico's sister was willowy and tall, with the same shiny, near-obsidian hair color as her brother's. She wore a denim skirt paired with a bright pink Janis Joplin T-shirt.

"You must be Lucy," said Eli, offering a hand. She paused for a moment, her shoulders tensing before she placed a delicate hand in his. She shook it once, a tiny wiggle more than anything substantial, and darted her hand back to her lap, her hands tapping at her thigh.

"Eli, right?" she asked, soft brown eyes meeting his for a few seconds before she glanced back at Nico.

"I'm going to hug you," Nico said, but it seemed almost a question. At a head nod from Lucy, he wrapped his arms around her.

Her husband wore a University of Notre Dame ball cap crushed over chin-length, salt and pepper hair. He thrust out a confident hand. "I'm Jack."

"Eli." They exchanged handshakes before Eli did a double-take. Nico's brother-in-law had a familiar grin that oozed sex and mischief, one that Eli had seen splashed across the front pages of the tabloids. "Hang on. You're Jack Hunter, aren't you?" He spun to face Nico. "Your brother-in-law is Jack fucking Hunter."

"Unfortunately, yes," said Nico, wincing as Jack pressed a sloppy, enthusiastic kiss to his cheekbone. He wiped his cheek with the back of his hand as if he had just been loved up by an off-leash mutt and not an international rock star.

“How did this not come up in conversation? You literally have a Jack Hunter poster in the van.”

“I told you he’d keep it,” Jack said to his wife, who sent a furtive head shake skyward.

“We use it to keep drafts out,” said Nico in a deadpan voice, before informing the server that they would do the breakfast buffet.

Eli fidgeted with his silverware, only half-listening as Nico and his family caught up with each other. His fingers shook as he rolled and unrolled the napkin around his utensils. He wasn’t nervous because of Jack. He had grown up in Los Angeles, where celebrity sightings were just another thing that happened. What had shaken him was Nico’s warning about Lucy, and then not being told about Jack. Nico either didn’t trust him to be nice to his sister—the idea of which broke Eli’s heart—or he didn’t trust him to inform him that he was having breakfast with a rock star. Either way, Eli once again felt ejected from some inner circle, looking in on somewhere he had mistakenly thought he belonged.

“Want me to get yours?” Eli asked Nico, who was pressing the heel of his hand into his thigh with a grimace.

Nico hesitated, pride warring with necessity in his expression, before he nodded.

“I’m getting Jack’s too,” said Lucy as she stood. “He’s tried to sign autographs while balancing a plate at buffets before. It never goes well. Crab Rangoon and packets of saltines go everywhere.”

“No smoked salmon though,” said Nico, tugging at the hem of Eli’s shirt. “Your allergies.” He looked down at the menu again before realizing that Eli, Lucy, and Jack were all staring at him.

“What?” asked Nico. “It’s not like we’re flush with EpiPens here.” He blushed and waved them off.

Eli followed Lucy to the charming buffet, snagging some mixed fruit and thick waffles that he stacked into a fluffy tower.

“So do you go with Jack on tour?” he asked Lucy, trying to make some sort of conversation.

“No,” she said, aligning strawberries in a straight row on her plate before she moved on to the next station. “I fly out when he’s in an area more than a few days or so, or he comes back to Indiana. I’m living there while he’s on tour.”

“That must be rough.”

“It is,” she agreed. “But we make it work. Long distance isn’t always the end of a relationship.” She hesitated, glancing at Eli before turning her attention to a tureen of oatmeal.

Eli duplicated his plate for Nico, drizzled on an abundant amount of maple syrup, and followed Lucy back to the table.

As they dug into their food, Nico turned to his sister expectantly. “Lu, have you thought any more about helping with my research?”

“No,” she answered, pulling several napkins from the tabletop dispenser and stacking them perpendicular to her coffee cup.

Eli waited for her to elaborate. She didn’t. Confused, he glanced at Jack, and inhaled sharply at the smile of sheer devotion on the musician’s face as he gazed at his wife. He’d seen that smile before, between two elderly Italian immigrants whispering *ti amo* in a noisy café. It was the smile of someone smack dab in the middle of a blissful happily ever after.

“Do you have any ideas?” Nico asked again, altering his word choice.

“What was it exactly you were looking for?” Lucy asked, head cocked to the side.

“I want to do a section on ballads and narrative songs in popular music.”

Her face brightened. “I can help with that.”

“Alright. How much time do you need for research?”

“Research?” She laughed as if he had proposed a visit to the North Pole.

Nico turned to Eli with the grandest smile on his face and *oh*.

This smile was *everything*.

This smile said, “I’m so proud of you” and “I believe in you” all with a single shining expression.

This smile made Eli want to do crazy things like climb Mount Everest and run a marathon and eat one of those puffer fish that could possibly kill a person if they bit into it wrong.

This smile was Bill Pullman’s *Independence Day* speech boiled down and distilled into one glorious grin.

And if this was just for his sister, Eli could only imagine the sheer voltage of a smile like that meant for himself. He didn’t think he would survive it.

He didn’t think he would survive the absence of it either.

“So first,” Lucy began, “you’re going to want to start easy. Look for story songs that start with ‘The Ballad of.’ ‘The Ballad of John and Yoko,’ for example. Curtis Loew. Danny Bailey. Sara Berry. Lucy

Jordan. Frankie Lee and Judas Priest. Johnny Cash has some good ones—Casey Jones, Ira Hayes, Annie Palmer. Then you can—”

Jack coughed beside her, and she gave him a questioning look. “Oh, yeah. ‘The Ballad of Mad Jack,’ by Jack Hunter.”

Jack tore into his breakfast burrito happily, and she continued. “Then you can move on to specific genres that focus on narrative songs. You’ve got the gunslinger songs from the fifties and sixties, for example. You could talk about ‘The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,’ or all of the *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs* album by Marty Robbins. You know, ‘Big Iron’ and all that. Then after that, you’re gonna want to look at the folk and country movements in the sixties and seventies, because they often overlapped. Johnny Cash, of course, but Willie Nelson, Peter, Paul and Mary, Harry Chapin, Jim Croce, Bob Dylan, all those groups. Then you just start looking for the one-time outliers. ‘The Devil Went Down to Georgia,’ ‘The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald,’ ‘Ode to Billie Joe,’ ‘Sink the Bismarck,’ and you’ve got yourself a whole section in your paper. So what’s up with you and Eli?”

Eli, about to take a drink of water, startled and completely missed his mouth, spilling all over his shirt. “What?”

“Them?” Jack peered at Eli and Nico, tilting his head back so he could see outside of his ball cap’s brim. “You sure, Cottontail?”

She wiped at her hands with a tattered napkin. “Eli got Nico grapes. And now Nico is eating the grapes.”

“Is this a euphemism for something?” Eli asked, but Nico groaned and hid his face in his hands.

“I hate grapes,” he said, muffled by his palms.

“You hate grapes. Are you even human?”

“They’re like little eyeballs. I just can’t.” He peered through his fingers at his sister. “I should have known you would catch it.”

Eli grasped for Nico’s hand covertly under the table and leaned toward his ear. “You didn’t have to eat the grapes,” he murmured.

“I didn’t want to make you feel bad.” Nico’s smile was secretive, but so very sweet. Eli filed away the fact that Nico didn’t like grapes, and then realized that he only needed to remember it for another twenty-four hours.

Suddenly, the thought of the future overwhelmed him. Smileless days and lonely nights and grapes that were just grapes and nothing more. He stood, his fork clattering off his plate and dripping maple syrup in a messy spiral on the tablecloth.

“Restroom,” he said, the word barely coherent in his haste. Nico’s eyes narrowed, but he dipped his chin as Eli whirled away.

The bathroom was chilly from the air conditioning, but the salty scent of the ocean permeated the air. Eli stared at himself in the mirror. How had he changed so much in the past few weeks? His skin had darkened to a light glow from their time in the sun, with a lovely farmer’s tan on his arms from dangling them out of the van window. His usually suave hair was in dire need of a haircut, and he still had a soft pink line near his eyebrow where that stupid tent pole had whacked him that first day. And, of course, there were the scant teardrops trailing salt across his cheeks. Those were definitely new.

The door swung open, and Eli looked away from his reflection only to be startled by Lucy stepping inside. “What is it with your

family and bathrooms?” he snapped, wiping away the dampness under his eyes.

She raised an elegant eyebrow, a younger image of her grandmother. “There’s a lot of things about Jack’s fame that makes me uncomfortable,” she said, straightening a generic palm tree print on the wall. “However, being able to bribe the manager with autographs so he’ll say the men’s room is out of order while I check on my friend is a nice perk.”

Eli’s mouth dropped. “You bribed the manager? Lucy, you know what they probably think is happening in here.”

She cocked her head. “What would that be?”

“It looks like you wanted the bathroom so you could be alone with me to...you know...have sex.”

“You’ve obviously been crying. It will look like we’re having very emotional sex. Or that I’m very scary. I suppose I could be if I tried.” She bared her teeth in an attempt at a growl, but it ended up like Elvis’s trademark sneer. She shrugged and snagged some paper towels from the dispenser. As she began to wipe down the counter, she asked, “How long have you been in love with my brother?”

Eli closed his eyes and exhaled. “How did you know? The grapes again?”

“No. I know because it’s the same way I can tell he is in love with you too.”

Eli scoffed. “He isn’t.” Nico would never be so ridiculous as to fall in love with someone he had just met. No, that was more Eli’s style.

“He smiles at you. And it’s not a polite smile, or a friendly smile. He smiles at you like...like...” She gritted her jaw in frustration,

waving her hand in a frantic flutter as she searched for the right words. “Like you’re precious. Not cute precious or creepy Gollum precious. Like you’re worth more than anything else in the world.”

Memories of murmured words from a canyonside embrace echoed through Eli’s mind. *You are not insignificant to me.*

“Oh,” he said, hope dawning inside like a springtime sunrise.

She tugged out her phone. “And if that doesn’t convince you, there is always photographic evidence.”

She scrolled through her phone, finding what she wanted and showing the screen to Eli. In a text thread with Nico was a photo of the two of them at a vista point outside of Sedona. They stood in front of a butte striped in cinnamon and rust that seemed to bleed into the lilac sunset just behind it. But the view wasn’t the focus of the picture. It was the silly, besotted smile on both their faces. It wasn’t just a *ti amo* smile and it wasn’t just a proud smile. It was *their* smile, born of late-night talks in dark hotel rooms and cheesy pictures outside neon-lit tourist attractions.

“Did you know that every one of us, at one point or another, asked if we could come with Nico on this trip? He turned us all down. And yet he allowed you, a perfect stranger who just needed some help, to join him.” She sighed. “My brother thinks of everyone except himself, to a fault. He’s so busy being everyone else’s white knight, he forgets that even knights need help to remove their armor and rest.”

“So...I’m his squire?”

Lucy laughed, a merry sound like the clink of cut crystal. “No, I think you’re just *his*.” She washed her hands and lifted her chin



toward the door. “We better get back. Jack can only distract Nico for so long.”

Eli followed her out of the bathroom and back to the table. Nico and Jack were laughing and talking, but it stopped as soon as Nico locked eyes with Eli. He grabbed the edge of the table and pushed himself into a standing position. “What happened?”

“Huh?” Eli frowned. Lucy tapped her cheekbones, and he remembered his tear-reddened eyes. “Oh...I went to wash something off my face, and there was sand in the sink, and I got it in my eye.” It made sense as long as no one actually thought through it.

Nico’s face softened instantly. “I have eye drops in the first aid kit. Let’s go.”

Eli glanced at Lucy, who had a smug, *I-told-you-so* expression, and Jack, who grinned like the Cheshire Cat. Maybe Lucy had a point after all.

After Lucy and Jack left for the concert venue for the latter’s rehearsal, Eli turned to Nico. What Lucy had proposed was all and well, but Eli had to get one thing clarified.

“Do you not trust me?” he asked quietly.

Nico jolted as if electrocuted. “What?”

“The warning about Lucy, and not telling me about Jack.” Eli swallowed, suddenly embarrassed. “I mean, I know your family has secrets, and we haven’t known each other long, but you treated me as if I was some bully out to pick on the little guys. I thought you knew me better than that. And Jack, well, I know it’s hard to be a

celebrity, but I swear, I just wanted to meet someone important to you.”

Something flashed behind Nico’s face, and his jaw tensed. “I know, and I should have told you. It’s not that I don’t trust you personally. It’s just that others haven’t been trustworthy.”

“I know, Nico, I can imagine it. And I love—” Eli paused and took a deep breath. “I love that you want to protect your family. Be the big brother until your dying breath. But you can’t. And if being stuck with me in a tin can for the past month hasn’t proven that you can trust—”

Nico crashed his mouth into Eli’s, causing Eli’s sentence to end in a squeaked “Oof!” He kissed him without any hesitation until finding a vacant hotel room seemed to be the most important task in the world.

“I do,” Nico whispered, smiling against his mouth. “I do. I trust you more than anyone.” He glanced down at Eli’s groin and grinned. “Now hold that thought. We’ve got a sign to find.”

They walked the pier, passing vendors and game stalls, occasionally stopping to buy a cheap souvenir. At one point, they went to an ice cream stand and ordered milkshakes. Eli chose French vanilla, and Nico chose, of all things, a s’mores milkshake. They sipped their drinks and grinned at each other like fools.

The Route 66 sign was smaller than Eli expected. It was a simple white outline, with black lettering reading “SANTA MONICA-END OF THE TRAIL” over a circled 66. “Here we are,” he said, clutching Nico’s hand as he stared up at the metal sign. “You finished it.”

“We finished it,” corrected Nico. His emphasis on the we made Eli’s heart leap. “And now we need a picture.”

He found a fellow tourist a few feet away, and after a few quick instructions, she waved them to stand under the landmark. They posed goofily, elbows linked and index fingers pointing upward towards the sign. Nico had to stop several times to hold back a fit of laughter, and when that woman finally aimed the phone for the shot, Nico and Eli looked at each other with bright eyes full of something brilliant that could never be captured in a single photo.

And then, they *smiled*.

# Chapter 20

If Jack had had his very kind but very expensive way, Nico and Eli would be holed up in the most glamorous hotel available, drinking million-dollar mojitos by a pool filled with diamonds and mermaid tears or whatever rich people liked. But Nico couldn't reconcile his preferred rustic tastes with the glitz and glamour of the city, so while Lucy and Jack stayed in a five-star hotel, Nico opted for a cheap motel in Santa Monica with salt-worn siding and sand-encrusted carpet.

As soon as Eli disappeared into the bathroom to shower before the concert, Nico reached for his phone and dialed the one person who would understand the seriousness of his situation.

"Matteo," said Nico, his fingers clenched around his phone. "I fucked up."

"What's wrong?" Matteo's voice was instantly wary. "What happened?"

Panicked words tumbled from Nico's lips. "It all happened like you said. I took him in, I took care of him, and the next thing you know, I fell in love. I fell in love with goddamned Bambi all over again."

Matteo's pause felt interminable, until he gasped in realization.  
"No! You didn't!"

Nico sat on the edge of the bed, exhausted from the weight of his confession. "Yes."

"Oh, Nico." Matteo's voice lacked his usual teasing tone, which made everything worse. "This is bad."

"I know."

"He's going to live in Los Angeles."

Nico swallowed, his throat tightening. "I know."

"He was just engaged to someone else!"

"I know!" His heart raced, and he pleaded it to stop before things escalated. *Five, four, three, two, one.*

"You have to tell him," said his brother, sounding as surprised to say it as Nico was to hear it.

Nico blinked. "I—wait, what?"

Matteo's voice grew adamant. "Nico, I've seen you hook up with more people than I can count since your divorce. I've never seen you like anyone, let alone love anyone. If this guy has turned you of all people into a mushy mess, then you need to tell him how you feel. No matter what you think his response will be."

"You really think so?"

"Yes."

"Alright then. I'll tell him tonight, after the concert."

"Mmmm." The speaker buzzed in Nico's ear as Matteo hummed with gloating satisfaction.

"Ugh, what?"

“I’m just savoring the feeling of giving you advice instead of vice versa.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Matteo’s voice became serious again. “Good luck tonight. I hope it goes the way you want. And if not, you come home and we go to Applebee’s and get absolutely hammered.”

“At Applebee’s,” Nico repeated.

“I gotta welcome you back to the Midwest properly, and Bob Evans doesn’t serve alcohol.” His voice softened. “Hey. It’ll be okay no matter what happens. It’ll be okay.”

Nico swallowed and nodded, though Matteo couldn’t see the gesture. “I know.” And he would, even if Eli rejected his confession in favor of his new start in Los Angeles. It would hurt like hell, but he’d be okay.

Matteo ended the call just as Eli left the bathroom, tousling his wet hair. There was an unusual wanness to his skin, and he wouldn’t meet Nico’s gaze.

“Hey, you okay?” asked Nico, taking the towel and finishing the drying process. Eli sighed from somewhere inside the mass of terry fabric and tangled hair, and Nico couldn’t help his indulgent smile. He loved taking care of Eli. He could be an overbearing steamroller at times, but this wasn’t like that. This was simply one of his basic needs now. *Eat, drink, sleep, take care of Eli. Repeat.*

“I’m okay,” said Eli in a muffled voice. “Just tired.”

“You sure? We can skip tonight if you want.”

He felt Eli’s body stiffen even through the rumpled towel. Eli tugged it down, staring at Nico with wide, shocked eyes. “You would

do that?”

“If you were sick?” Nico frowned, unsure where this was going. “Absolutely. Eli, Jack is my brother-in-law. I know where he lives. I could probably get him to give me a private concert at my house with the promise of homemade cookies alone. He’ll be fine.”

“It’s not even that,” said Eli, his throat thick. “This is the big finale to your Route 66 trip. After this, it’s normal highways and normal hotels. Normal life.”

“Then I’ll just have to start planning my next road trip,” Nico said, and it was more than speculation. It was a promise, a hint that the road wasn’t over for the two of them. Not for miles. Maybe not forever.

Eli’s lip twitched, and Nico couldn’t tell if it was the beginning of a smile or a sob. He flung his arms around Nico, burying his head in his shoulder. “The funny thing is, I’m just tired, honest,” he said, his breath vibrating against Nico’s skin. “I don’t even have a headache. But...thanks.”

“Then I think it’s time for a rock concert.” Nico pulled out his phone and tapped off a text to Lucy, and they were on their way.

\* \* \*

Jack Hunter was the fifth concert Eli had been to in his life, and the first where he knew exactly what the musical artist liked for breakfast. The stage was a raucous explosion of colors and lights, rock chords and wild drum solos, and a whole lot of Jack being Jack.

Eli loved it. By the time he performed his last song, the hit single “The Ballad of Mad Jack,” it felt like no time had passed at all.

Fans of all ages, wearing Jack Hunter T-shirts from various periods of Jack’s career over the past two and a half decades, held up their phones in lieu of lighters and called for an encore. Jack sprinted out, whooping and hollering and shooting finger guns to the crowd. His energy was palpable, even after a grueling ninety-minute set.

“Thank you, thank you,” said Jack, stepping close to the microphone. “This next one was originally a fantastic song by the Pointer Sisters, but Elvis Presley—you heard of him?” He winked at the crowd and was met with cheers. “He covered it toward the end of *his* career.” Jack put emphasis on “his,” as if to signify to his fans that this was it. This was the end of Jack Hunter as they knew him. “He often said it was the ‘story of his life.’ Here’s ‘Fairytale’ for you.”

Nico’s breath caught. “Jack, you clever bastard,” he muttered.

Eli turned to him. “Do you know this song?”

“Of course. Lucy’s my sister. She lives and breathes Elvis.”

“Oh,” said Eli. The guitarist began an opening sequence that sounded a little bit country, but it was definitely more than a little bit rock n’ roll. Eli didn’t recognize it. “Is he singing it about Lucy?”

Nico snorted. “Definitely not. Just listen.”

Eli turned back to the stage just in time to see Jack point somewhere above the audience and wiggle his fingers in the shape of bunny ears. Then he leaned into the mic to sing, and Eli finally understood.



The song was no love song. The lyrics were about packing up and leaving, about deception and the regret of being used for so long.

“It’s a goodbye song,” Eli realized aloud. “A very bitey one at that.”

“A perfect choice for a farewell tour,” said Nico, and Eli understood at last.

Jack’s electricity on stage was vibrant and transcendent, but no star was meant to shine that brightly for so long. The lines on his face weren’t rugged, they were weary. Stage lights and sweat-tracked makeup fought shadows under his eyes, but they still existed under the glitz and glamour. Under that powerful voice and captivating persona was an exhausted man ready to move on with life, and he was orchestrating his final bow with a song about how people wouldn’t forget him when he was gone.

Eli, on the other hand, was trying desperately to pause life right where it was. He turned to look at Nico, whose softened gaze betrayed both his worry and pride. He clearly loved the rock star, his brother in all but blood. To Nico, family was everything.

And God, Eli wished and wished and *wished* that he could be part of his family. That Nico wasn’t leaving him alone tomorrow with no family at all.

The concert ended with a simple spotlight on Jack that faded to inky black. “Jack Hunter has left the building,” mused Nico, squinting as the house lights came up.

“Are we going backstage to meet them?” asked Eli.

“No,” said Nico. “Lucy and Jack don’t see each other often. The only reason she’s out here in the first place is that he has some spare days to relax until his next show. Let’s give them some privacy.” And in doing so, grant themselves some privacy of their own.

Nico and Eli headed to the parking lot, taking their time while other patrons rushed to beat the traffic. Eli didn’t see the need to hurry out; in fact, maybe they could just stay overnight in the concert arena and then tomorrow wouldn’t happen at all.

But all things eventually end, even queues to expensive and crowded parking lots. Soon, they caught sight of Esmeralda, garish and gleaming among the other vehicles—a bird of paradise in a flock of house wrens. Nico and Eli climbed inside, buckled their seat belts, and drove off into the night.

# Chapter 21

The road edged along the city, and the van edged along the road. Stuttering back and forth like an unsure teenager, Esmeralda, the greatest multicolored rust bucket Eli had ever known, cut through the endless I-10 traffic. Eli snacked on leftover stale popcorn from a Santa Monica pier vendor. He was practically bouncing in his seat, his muscles tensing like an overstretched coil as he tried to break into the most important conversation of his life.

Nico white-knuckled the steering wheel, as if it would fall off if he let go. His full lips were set in a deep-seated frown, and his dark eyebrows slashed his forehead in a determined v-shape.

Eli took a breath and said, "That was a good concert." He crumpled up the popcorn bag and tossed it in the back, holding back a smile at Nico's consequential scowl.

"Jack knows how to put on a show. Both on and off stage." An escaped tendril of thick, dark hair crooked across Nico's forehead, giving his silhouette a roguish flare.

"I like him," continued Eli. "He's fun. Lucy too."

"They are," agreed Nico.

Okay, they had the small talk down so far. It couldn't be that hard to transition into a declaration of love, could it? *The concert was*

*good, your family is cool, and by the way, I love you so much that I may actually die if you drive away from me tomorrow.*

“I wouldn’t mind seeing Jack in concert again,” added Eli.

“Oh yeah?” Nico flicked a finger to activate the turn signal. “I have connections for more tickets, you know.” He turned from the road for a brief moment, sending a long-lashed wink Eli’s way. “If not, those connections aren’t getting Christmas presents this year.”

“How cruel of you,” said Eli, laughing at Nico’s villainous smile in return. This was their usual, wonderful banter. Eli had set the stage, now he just had to go for his confession. He inhaled a sharp breath—and so did Nico.

“Look, Eli,” said Nico as Eli swallowed a frustrated noise, slamming the brakes on his speech.

Nico paused, stretching his neck from side to side. “These past weeks, they’ve been...” He hesitated again. Eli wanted to shake the words out of him, to make him finish with something that would stop his insides from somersaulting. *Wonderful. Amazing. The best time of my life.*

“Fun,” Nico finished.

*Fun* wasn’t quite what Eli was looking for, but it wasn’t terrible. “Fun,” he echoed. “It was.”

Another one of those damn hesitations, and Eli gripped the armrest, ready to commandeer the conversation for the sake of his nerves.

“And we said this—” Nico gestured between the two of them. “This would only be until the end of the road.”

“We did,” said Eli. He was balanced on a dangerous precipice, ready for the next words. All Nico had to do was say them, and he’d either whisk Eli from the edge, or push him off into miserable oblivion.

Nico stayed silent, tapping at the steering wheel before blurting out, “Fuck, I’m not good at these things.”

“What things?” Eli wanted to touch him on the arm, but kept his hands folded in his lap.

“Talking about feelings,” grumbled Nico. “I can talk for hours about the emotions of literary characters, but I can’t state my own damn thoughts.”

Eli’s heart took a step back from that imaginary cliff, but he kept his voice steady. “Maybe you should pretend I’m in your class then.”

Nico barked out a short laugh. “Trust me, the things I want to say, I can’t say in an academic setting.” Eli shivered at the heat in his voice.

“Try it anyway,” said Eli, his voice hoarse.

Nico’s jaw worked. “Fine. Class, welcome to Nico’s Conflicted Emotions 101.”

“Good start. I’d take this class.”

“Really?” There was a small, hopeful tremor in Nico’s voice.

“Absolutely.” Eli took a chance and placed his hand on Nico’s thigh. Nico scooped it up, pressing a defiant kiss to his knuckles. “What else would you say in this class?”

“Um,” Nico looked momentarily startled, as if Eli’s hand had captured his entire attention. “Well, if this was a real class, I’d tell them attendance wasn’t mandatory as long as they can prove

they've learned the material. But in this case, I'd say attendance was definitely mandatory."

"You would?" Eli said, before pausing and replaying Nico's words in his head. "Wait, you don't require attendance in your classes?"

"Of course not." Nico scowled again. "These students are paying thousands of dollars to be in debt for the rest of their lives, and are under extreme stress from every angle. Not everyone processes information the same way. I'm not going to force them to learn the information in a way that may not be best for them. What's the point of learning if you're miserable?"

Eli swallowed against a lump in his throat. His eyes were stinging, pinpricks of pain and joy. Of course, this wonderful, amazing man would go against the grain to help others. Eli remembered his own failing grades and how hard it had been to concentrate and listen in his classes. He thought of Nico's sister, dear, sweet Lucy, who he'd known half a day but could already tell would have been miserable in a traditional college setting.

"Tell me more," he croaked out.

"About my attendance policies?" Nico wrinkled his forehead.

"No," breathed Eli. "Yes. Maybe. Shit. God, I love you."

Nico dropped his hand, which was convenient, because Eli needed it to clap over his mouth.

"You what?" asked Nico with a slow blink. He flicked the turn signal again, the electronic clicking providing a counterbeat to Eli's racing pulse.

"Well." Eli cleared his throat. "I, um, love you. I guess." He mentally slapped himself.

“You guess,” repeated Nico.

“I know?”

“That’s a little better.” Nico frowned. “I need to pull over.”

“Oh. Okay.” Eli bit his lip. That didn’t sound good. “There’s an exit for Culver City coming up. It’s a decent neighborhood, if you need to drop me off.”

“Why would I drop you off?” Nico’s right hand had taken on a life of its own, punctuating his words with angry, dramatic gestures.

“Because I told you that I love you?” Eli’s voice got higher and ended on a squeak.

Nico rubbed at his temple and muttered something long and angry that was definitely not English. Eli caught a few words like *idiota* and *stupido* that made him want to shrink in his seat.

“You’re yelling at me in Italian,” said Eli. “This is not a thing that has happened to me before. I’m not sure I like it.”

“I’m yelling at *me* in Italian,” said Nico. “Not you.” His tone softened. “Never you. Except that one time in the shower, and that led to good things in the end.”

“It did?” God, why had Eli’s voice gone so squeaky? And why was everything going so much better than he had planned? And why was Nico suddenly tensing, slapping an arm over Eli’s chest so quickly it felt like being punched?

It took the mixture of squealing brakes and a bang that shook the car and forced all of the oxygen from Eli’s chest before he understood what was happening. Eli didn’t even shout. He was supposed to shout or scream in these situations, wasn’t he? But his voice was lost as the van spun like a broken compass to the tune of

fierce metallic shrieks. Then, in a moment that could have been seconds or minutes or years, he blinked, and silence reigned once more.

His first thought was, *But Nico was about to tell me he loved me. How inconvenient.*

His second thought was more coherent as reality whooshed back, filling every sense until he was nauseous from the overload. Everyone was shouting, and did the sirens really need to be that loud? It made his head throb. Maybe this was in his head and he was having a migraine hallucination. Maybe if Nico just read him some Poe, everything would be fine.

*Once upon a midnight dreary...*

Another blink, and another level of awareness. He hurt everywhere, but it wasn't bad. Some blood ran down his arm, but when he touched it, it seemed mostly superficial. He was okay. He was alive. Dazed as hell, but alive.

*Nico. Oh, God, Nico.* He glanced over at the driver's seat, but Nico was nowhere to be seen.

"Eli!" Nico's voice was filled with panic as he flung the passenger door open, his hands patting down Eli's body.

"M'fine," mumbled Eli, but that only made Nico's movements more frantic as the bigger man unbuckled him and pulled him from the vehicle and into his arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Nico's arms were shaking, wrapped around Eli so tightly that the air left his lungs. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."



“I’m fine,” Eli repeated, and some of the haze in his mind cleared. “I’m fine, Nico.” He pulled back and looked into Nico’s eyes, and inhaled sharply at the absolute terror reflected there, unfocused yet unyielding. “Nico...”

Nico’s shuddering became worse, and Eli grabbed him by the hand, pulling him to the curb and forcing him to sit. He heard voices, calls of “Are you alright?” and “An ambulance is coming,” but he focused solely on the ashen face in front of him.

“I’m here,” said Eli. “I’m here. Tell me five things you can touch, okay?”

Nico said nothing, his earlier words vanished as if he had never spoken at all. Eli placed his hands on Nico’s face, his thumbs running over his cheekbones, over and over in a soothing motion, but Nico’s eyes were wide and lost.

“Darling, I’m here. Can you see me? I’m here, I’m not even hurt. It was just an accident, and everyone is fine. Give me those five things you can touch, please. You’ll feel better.”

Nothing. Nico’s face was blank. Eli began to worry that he was in shock. He curled up behind Nico, wrapping his arms around his broad chest, his legs crossed around his hips. He laid his cheek on Nico’s spine, feeling the trembles and short breaths vibrate through his own skin.

“I’m okay,” he repeated once more, pressing a kiss between Nico’s shoulder blades. “Stay with me. We’re okay.” A few feet away, Esmeralda’s crumpled body lay on the highway, painted panels dented and dirty. *Go on without me*, she seemed to say, as if this were a World War II movie and not a car accident.

Another shudder, and Nico's body relaxed, just slightly. Eli leaned back, and Nico leaned back with him, pressing their cheeks together. As sirens wailed, coming closer and closer, Eli pressed a kiss to Nico's temple and froze at the taste of copper on his lips.

"You're hurt." Eli swiped a hand across Nico's temple, which came back wet with blood. "He's hurt!" he called to the EMTs as they ran toward them, carting a stretcher behind them. He ripped off his hoodie and held up the sleeve against the wound, applying pressure.

Nico looked up at him with confused, bleary eyes. He cupped a hand around Eli's jaw. "Five things I can touch," he repeated. "You," and then he stopped, frowning deeply. "Just you." His eyes rolled back, and he drifted into unconsciousness, leaving Eli alone in the midst of chaos.

# Chapter 22

The funeral was held two days later.

They huddled together on the beach at sunset, the sky a purple and peach glaze reflected against the darkened Pacific. Jack wore all black, his trim figure accented in a suit and tie. His expression was solemn and stark as he began to speak. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here to—”

And Eli lost it. He had tried to hold it together while Lucy lit the memory candles. He had tried to stay calm when Jack looked upon him with that grim smile. But when Jack started speaking, Eli snorted so loudly that his eyes watered from the force of it.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he said, clutching at his chest and wheezing.

Jack’s lips quirked. “Come on, man, I worked hard on this. Knock it off.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Eli simpered, wiping at his eyes, his ribs hurting from restraining laughter. “Heaven forbid I get between a performer and their performance.”

“Damn straight.” Jack adjusted his seal-gray tie. “Now, where was I? Oh yes. Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to honor the

memory of our beloved Esmeralda. Though her time with us was short, her mileage was long in our hearts. Let us pray.”

Eli peeked over at Nico and was pleased to see a thin smile on that stoic face. The faux funeral was mainly for his benefit, after all. The cut on his forehead had been minimal—nothing a butterfly strip couldn’t handle. His panic attack, however, had affected him past anything an EMT could fix. He had barely eaten in the past two days, spending his time either on the phone with his insurance company, shipping any salvageable items back home, dealing with the repair shop, napping, or simply staring into space. When Eli had mentioned his concerns to Jack and Lucy, Jack had decided that maybe facing the issue head-on with a bit of humor would help.

“Eli, would you like to say a few words?” asked Jack, gesturing to their makeshift memorial.

Eli took his place next to the camping chair they were using as an altar. He kissed his fingers and touched them to Esmeralda’s keys. The huff of amusement from Nico’s direction, no matter how fragile, was enough to fill Eli with relief.

“I found Esmeralda at a critical time in my life,” he began. “She was rusty, a little cantankerous, but she welcomed me with open arms. Er, open doors?” He glanced over at Nico, who had a small smile on his lips. *Here goes nothing.*

“Anyway, I was, uh, lonely, and awkward, and a bit lost, and she wrapped her seat belt around me and gave me a home, for a few weeks anyway. And because of y—her, I got to see things I’d never seen before. I saw canyons and caverns, mountains and deserts, and the red rocks of Sedona. I was swallowed by a blue whale and

touched slightly inappropriately by wild burros. I was part of two weddings and celebrated a birthday and a bromanciversary. And it wasn't always perfect, but no adventure ever is. And no matter what happens from now on, I just want to say that it was honestly the best time of my entire life. And for the love of God, Jack, are you playing Styx?!"

Jack, who had been underscoring his eulogy with soft instrumentals, looked up from his guitar. "What? I thought 'Come Sail Away' was a good funeral song for a vehicle. Why, what would you play?"

"Maybe 'Little Red Corvette?'" suggested Lucy.

Jack made a conciliatory noise and started on the Prince song.

"Anyway, I'll never forget Esmeralda, and I'm grateful for my time with her," Eli rushed. "Rest in pieces, girl."

\* \* \*

Eli and Jack went on a stroll closer to the ocean's edge, or, as Nico suspected, Jack got Eli out of the way so his sister could talk to him one-on-one. She sat down next to him on the wooden bench where he'd spent the majority of the funeral for his long-lost vehicle.

A funeral for a van was idiotic, and sappy, and corny, and the most Eli thing he could imagine. Nico wasn't a fool. He knew he'd been a veritable zombie the past few days. He had seen the worried glances sent his way, not just by Eli, but by his sister and Jack. But his brain just didn't care to process anything anymore. The car

accident had split his world into Out There and In Here, and In Here, inside his mind, he was fighting too many monsters. He glimpsed the peace and the love Out There, but he had no energy to go toward it.

“You okay?” Lucy asked, patting his leg. She sounded calm, almost clinical, but he recognized the concern in her neutral voice.

“I’m fine,” he said, looking away. “She was just a van.”

Lucy’s eyes darted back to the beach line, where Jack and Eli were walking and chatting. Eli’s gleeful laugh echoed through the air. It had that unique ring of merriment that was completely his own, as if the person next to him had just made him the happiest he had ever been. “I really like him.”

Nico released a shaky sigh. “Don’t do this.”

“Don’t do what? My liking him has nothing to do with you.”

“Lu.” He sent her a weary look. “I know how this goes. This is the part where you tell me to fight for him, no matter what.”

“Well.” She raised an eyebrow. “For all those gothic novels you mope over, you do know your romance tropes.”

“He’s grieving over his mom and his marriage. A whole mess of things.” They weren’t lies, but they were easy truths and easy excuses.

In the distance, Jack and Eli’s friendly walk had deteriorated into the two of them slinging globs of wet sand at each other. “Yes,” Lucy said. “That right there is definitely a man grieving.”

“Lu,” Nico said. “You gotta understand. My life is now separated into two parts. There’s Before, and there’s After. I knew who I was Before, before the accident. I was strong. I was calm. I could take on anything. At least I thought I could. And it’s not the leg. The leg is a

challenge, and I'm angry about it, and there are going to be days where I rage and curse and throw a tantrum because of it. But in the end, I can handle it. This trip proved that, at least. It's part of me now, and I'm okay with that. But this emptiness, this all-encompassing fear? That's what has ruined me. I look back at Before and everything seems like a wasted opportunity. And After... After, After, After. After is just a nightmare, and I can't wake up from it. I can't fucking wake up. It's constant fear, and anxiety, and deprivation of all senses except sheer terror. I look back at Before, everything I learned, everything I've studied, all my beloved books and stories and poetry, and none of it saved me from this prison of my own damn brain. That's no life for someone else. So this is it. This is all I have left. I'm going to lose Eli. Fuck it, I'm going to lose everyone, one by one. My life is one big nightmare and I can't wake up."

*Before. After. In Here. Out There.* It was all so very tiring.

He snuck a glance at Lucy, and was startled by her pursed lips and tense jaw.

"Too bad you don't know anyone who has panic attacks and anxiety issues," she said, her tone a little hurt.

Nico slumped forward, elbows on his knees. *Fuck.* "Lucy, I didn't think—" He stopped before he said *think of you*. But it was true. He was so used to being Lucy's helper that it had never entered his mind to flip the narrative. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm really sorry. I should have asked you for help."

"It's fine," she said with a reluctant sigh. "It's just that the way your brain is working right now; it isn't necessarily a flaw or

something to be ashamed of. It's like what you said about your leg. It's just the way it is. And that's okay."

"This isn't about accepting myself in spite of adversity or something motivational like that," he said, clenching his fists. "This is a matter of safety. This is a matter of taking care of Eli. What if he had been really hurt in that accident? What if he had been bleeding out, and all I did was sit there, catatonic?" Just imagining the scenario sent his panic skyrocketing. Images wormed their way into his mind, images of Eli in pain, Eli laying in darkness, and so much of Eli's blood—

"I can't tell you what to do," said Lucy, in her matter-of-fact way. "I can tell you that I love you. I can tell you that Jack loves you. And I can tell you that—" She glanced up as Eli and Jack began to trudge toward them. "The rest, I guess you'll have to find out for yourself."

\* \* \*

Eli and Jack returned to the bench, laughing and panting, their bare calves coated with salt and sand. Lucy pulled a few wet wipes from her purse and handed them to the two men. Nico sat beside her, still as marble.

"It's time for us to head to the airport," said Jack, sending a wistful glance toward his wife. He wiped the last of the sand from his hands before reaching for her and pulling her close. "Eli, hope to see you again, man."



Eli flinched at his words. He hoped to see Jack and Lucy again, too, but it wasn't up to him anymore.

Lucy smiled at him, but it was a sad smile. She nodded her goodbye and turned to her brother. "I'll see you soon." She sent another unhappy look toward Eli, and it made his blood run cold. He had missed something important, something terrible.

Eli sat down on the bench next to Nico. There were a million things he had to say, but they zoomed around his brain like cars on the interstate, and he couldn't get any of them to slow down long enough to speak.

But then Nico, his gaze pointed out at the murky Pacific, finally said those three important words: "I'm leaving tomorrow."

Eli jolted, an instinctive movement, his body geared to run from imminent heartbreak. He tried to think of anything he could say that wouldn't betray his crumbling heart. "Are you going to ask me to come with you?"

There was no surprise in Nico's expression. Eli wished there was. Surprise would have indicated that Nico felt something else, something more. Resignation was far worse.

"No, I'm not." The words were said on a stony exhale.

"Oh." Eli had known this conversation was coming the entire trip, so why was he so unprepared? Had that inkling of hope, dashed in the car accident, destroyed all of his emotional barriers? "Why not?"

"Because I don't want you to."

Eli let out a frustrated noise. "I don't believe that. Ask me. I'm here." He clapped his hand over Nico's. "I'm waiting. Just ask me."

Nico gently untangled their fingers. “We said this was temporary. Those were the rules.”

“Fuck your rules,” snapped Eli. “This is different now. *We’re* different.”

“How would we even make this work?” Nico shook his head. “We live half a country apart.”

“No, we do not.” Eli gritted his teeth, frustrated by the flimsy excuse. “Nothing is permanent. I can get right on that plane and go back with you.”

Nico huffed. “You barely know me. It’s been less than a month. Why would you follow me across half the country?”

“I would do it because I’ve *done* it! I followed you through cities and fields and deserts and mountains, and I will do it all again, over and over, if that’s what it takes. Isn’t that what love is supposed to be?”

Nico’s entire body stiffened. “Love?”

Pain was incoming. It was on a trajectory with Eli’s heart, a falling star crash-landing and dissipating into nothing but a hollow emptiness. He took a breath to calm his racing heart. “Yes, I love you. I told you that before the accident, and I’ve told you with milkshakes and burros and tumbles on motel beds. I’ve told you with screams over canyons and whispers around a campfire. But if you need it said out loud, I’ll tell you every minute of every day. I love you.”

Nico bowed his head. “You’re too young for me.”

“Stop that.” Eli’s voice cracked. “You said that didn’t matter. I’d love you if there were decades between us. You’re smart, and funny,

and so kind, no matter how standoffish you get. Anyone who knows you for more than a minute can tell that.”

“But I don’t—” Nico swallowed. “I don’t—”

Every thought and emotion inside Eli’s mind screeched to a standstill. “You don’t—?”

“I don’t love you.”

Oh.

*Oh.*

What a stupid word, *Oh*. But it rattled and rattled inside Eli, ricocheting off every hope and dream, and shattering them one by one.

*Oh.*

Eli slumped back down on the bench. “I see.”

“I’m sorry, Eli, I never meant—” Nico began, but Eli held up a hand for silence.

“What do we do now?” he asked, willing his voice to steady. The mantra he had had during his mother’s decline popped into his head. *Look at it piece by piece and accept what can and cannot be done.*

“Is your new apartment ready?”

Perfect—an isolated issue he could concentrate on. “Jaime was going to put the keys in a lockbox for me to pick up tomorrow. I can text him to see if I can get them early, but he’s usually pretty busy.”

Nico nodded. “If not, we still have the hotel room.” He rubbed the back of his neck. He always did when he was uncomfortable. How could he suggest that Eli barely knew him, when Eli knew every endearing idiosyncrasy like that? “I could always get a second room.”

“It’s not worth the money,” said Eli. “We’ll be fine.”

It wasn’t fine. It would never be fine. Santa Monica was always going to be the end of the road for them, and Eli was an idiot for thinking otherwise. He stood, moving to the altar and picking up the keyring with Esmeralda’s now useless keys. They were so dull compared to the rental car keys in his pocket. They were keys to a vehicle that had tried to be so much more than she—no, *it, it, it*, because *it* wasn’t anything but a stupid van—really was and had been destroyed in the process. It had literally crashed and burned, a vehicular Icarus that had turned toward the sun and been blasted in its wake.

“Back to the hotel then,” he said. “I’ll meet you at the car.” He turned his back on the beach, on Esmeralda, and on any hopes that things might have ended up differently.

## Chapter 23

The road followed the creek, and the car followed the road. Slithering back and forth like a slippery eel, the road cut across the endless Indiana farmlands, where dried corn husks, decaying after the harvest, littered the frozen soil.

“Everything is going wrong, Zeus,” said Nico in a raw and raspy voice. “I need help. Please.”

Zeus didn’t answer, but a slow tapping came from the passenger seat. Nico looked to his right to find that the ancient god had been replaced by a solemn black crow, preening and grooming his shiny, sleek wings.

No, not a crow. A *raven*.

“Well,” said Nico, disguising a shiver as an awkward stretch. “Sir—or Ma’am, I suppose—I’m sorry, but I’m not sure what you’re supposed to do for me. Can I have the others back? Please?”

The raven gazed at him with mindless, unblinking orbs. Nico would never believe he’d feel this way, but he missed his ornery literary companions. His *other* literary companions, not this stately, ebony bird.

He cleared his throat, the unbroken silence making his spine crawl. “Okay, okay,” Nico exhaled. “I can work with this.” He glanced

out the window at the starless sky. It was sleeting, the ice frosting his windshield, making it almost impossible to see the road. He gripped the steering wheel tightly as the car bucked against the slick asphalt.

“So, Eli is...wonderful,” Nico said, embarrassed that even though he studied words for a living, he couldn’t come up with anything that described his feelings half as well as he wanted. “But it’s too much. I’m not going to subject him to my issues. He’s been through too much, hasn’t he?” He sighed, feeling the weight of the raven’s unyielding gaze smother him like a blanket of fog. “But, as you might say, ‘on the morrow he will leave me, as my hopes have flown before.’ So what does it matter? What does any of this matter?”

The raven didn’t answer.

“Sometimes, I’m so scared, I can hardly breathe,” Nico confessed. “I’m there, all over again, in that car. At any moment, without warning, the fear consumes me. It tears me apart. And I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, I can’t make the loop stop. It just doesn’t stop.”

The raven didn’t answer, and it filled Nico with rage.

“You creepy, evil fucker,” he snapped. “You don’t know what it’s like. You’re a stupid bird from a stupid poem, and this is the real goddamned world, and I just want it all to go away. I want to stop worrying. I want to stop hurting. So please, just leave me alone.”

And Nico, knowing what that bird would do, knowing what that bird would say, mouthed along with the creature—“Nevermore.”

No one told Nico to slow down, but it didn’t matter—the crash was inevitable. He gritted his teeth, grasped the steering wheel, and let it happen.

The crunch of metal against living wood should have been more dramatic. It should have roared like a tornado and echoed like a scream across a canyon. But in reality, it was a dull, hollow sound, barely there before it faded away into the night. His heart leaped into his throat as he went airborne for a few seconds before the car landed on its side in a dirty, slush-filled ditch.

And then, there was merely silence, except for the silken rustling of feathers. Nico twisted his head, a few measly centimeters that sent pain slashing through his skull. The raven perched on what remained of the hood, shattered glass surrounding him like fallen stars.

“Wake up,” Nico told himself, tasting copper on his lips. “Wake up.” But terror clutched at his chest, a tremendous, clawed monster squeezing his lungs with impenetrable pressure.

“Go away,” Nico said, and he wasn’t sure if he was talking to the raven or the panic tearing through his bloodstream. “Please. Please. Just go away.”

But the raven, with its dreaming demon’s eyes, merely whispered, “Nevermore.”

\* \* \*

Nico awoke to find that darkness still cloaked the motel room. Eli’s arm was tight against his waist, providing comfort and warmth when he didn’t deserve it. They hadn’t gone to sleep like that. Each had silently claimed their side of the bed, the invisible line of separation

charted firmly down the middle. Eli's forehead creased as he slept, his fuller bottom lip dipped in a frown. He was probably subconsciously disapproving of his body's choice to embrace Nico.

Nico lifted Eli's arm and tucked it against the man's hip. A quick peek at the hotel alarm clock showed it was just after 1:30 in the morning. Nico only knew one person in the area other than Eli, and luckily, it was someone whose definition of bedtime was as confused as his was. He dressed, arranged a rideshare, left a note with his intended location, and left the motel and Eli behind.

Thirty minutes and one suspicious concierge later, he was knocking on the door of a private bungalow at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

Jack Hunter, legally Jack Vincent, three-time Grammy winner, platinum recording artist, man voted by *People Magazine* as "most likely to accidentally start a war," and Nico's only brother-in-law, opened the door wearing nothing but ragged plaid sleep shorts and holding, of all things, a freezer bag full of pennies.

The rock star lifted the bulging bag of coins in greeting. "Nico."

"Jack. Thanks for, uh—"

Jack waved him off, stepping aside to let him in. "I was awake."

"I figured." Nico entered the posh bungalow, admiring the stylish mid-century decor. "Nice place."

"Thanks." Jack fell back onto a designer sofa, nearly knocking over a purple orchid in a crystal vase. "Marilyn Monroe used to come here for peace and quiet. I thought Lucy would like the seclusion."

"Did she get off to the airport okay?"

"Yes," Jack said. "She was fine. I got her a new set of earplugs for the flight. She was annoyed that I signed the flat end." His gleeful



grin showed he didn't regret that in the least.

"When is your flight?"

"Tomorrow morning. I have a show in Phoenix tomorrow night."

Nico shifted his feet. "I shouldn't have come. You need your sleep."

"Hush about all that. Take a seat."

Nico started to sit in a nearby armchair but stopped when he saw the objects on the coffee table. "Jack..."

Jack followed his gaze to the bottle of whiskey and full glass next to it. "Oh, I'm not drinking it. Come here." He reached into the bag of coins and pulled out a handful. He held a penny up, the copper glinting in the lamplight. "When I'm in a mood where I want a drink, I pour a glass, think about everything that makes me want a drink, and throw a penny in the glass. It makes me focus on the action instead of the urge to drink. Also, pennies are covered in germs, so then I'm grossed out by the whiskey." To demonstrate, he flipped a penny in the air. It spun several cycles before landing in the glass with a splash.

"You have good aim," said Nico. "Lots of practice?"

Jack blew out a shaky exhale. "You have no idea."

"Does it help?"

"It does."

"So tonight was a penny in the drink night?"

Jack nodded, gripping another coin between his index and thumb. "You know, the funny thing about love is, life still goes on around it. It makes you feel like you're stuck under glass in this perfect world, protected from everything outside. But outside is still

happening. Outside still exists.” He tossed a penny toward the glass. It hit the rim and fell to the table. “I have obligations that existed before I met Lucy. I have to handle them. I have to do this tour. She knows it; I know it. It doesn’t mean it doesn’t suck.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I miss her, and she’s only been away a few hours. Isn’t that crazy? That someone can be stitched so firmly in your heart that even the tiniest tug makes you want to fall apart at the seams?”

Nico knew precisely what Jack meant. His own heart was ripping in half for someone who hadn’t even left him yet.

“Did you ever worry that she wouldn’t be able to handle all of—” Nico lifted a hand to motion at something that represented Jack’s crazy lifestyle, but he ended up pointing at the drink.

“Every day.” Jack tossed another penny. It landed on the plush beige carpet. “Did you know I’m seeing a therapist? Through my tablet of all things. It’s like *Star Trek*, but with more mother issues.”

Nico raised his eyebrows. “I didn’t know.”

“About my mother issues? The whole world knows about those.”

Nico huffed in agreement. Even the thought of Jack’s diva mother made him want to chug the whiskey bottle. “No, I mean, I didn’t know that you were in therapy.”

“Not a lot of people know. Your mom might. Not because Lucy or I told her, but because she just knows. I think she’s a wizard.” He sent Nico a smile that betrayed his veiled attempt at keeping the conversation light. “Therapy isn’t for everyone, and it’s hard to find one that fits what you need. Lucy had one for a month or so, and they just tried to out-logic each other. Now she’s working with one

specializing in a technique to help with nightmares. After that, she'll pick what to work on next. I haven't gotten full-out drunk since we got married, but the therapy has really helped," Jack continued. "I've slipped. Fuck, have I slipped. I'm not perfect, despite what my publicist would tell you."

"If your publicist is convincing people of that, you're not paying them enough."

Jack threw back his head and laughed. "The point is, I have problems, and therapy is working. As is throwing pennies into a drinking glass, for some reason." He gave Nico a sidelong glance. "I take it you and Eli aren't alright?"

Nico was startled. "How'd you know?"

"You're here. Why else would you be?"

"Maybe I just wanted to see you."

Jack leaned his head back on the sofa cushion, his messy hair fanning along the upholstery. "You're a terrible liar. Talk."

Nico fidgeted with the armrest, wondering how many Hollywood icons had sat in it, playing with the fabric while tending to their heartbreak. "He loves me."

"Duh."

"I love him."

"Duh."

"And I broke up with him."

"And...opposite of duh." Jack snapped his head up, his hair flying into his face. "Un-duh. Why did you do that?"

"He doesn't deserve to deal with all of this." Nico gestured to his entire body, ending with a tap at his temple. "I completely blanked

the other day. We crashed, and I just wasn't there anymore. I barely remember anything except being scared out of my fucking mind. He could have been badly hurt, and I couldn't help him."

Jack's gaze softened. "That must be rough. I could introduce you to the therapist in the computer if you want."

Nico sighed. "I know I should. It's just...I would have to acknowledge that I need help. And if I need help, that means I'm not there for someone else who needs it. What if something happens? What if something bad happens?"

It felt so juvenile to say aloud, but it was true. *What if something bad happens?*

"Look at me." Jack grinned as their eyes met. "You have nice eyes."

"Thank you?"

His brother-in-law cupped his jaw with two hands, never breaking eye contact. In a solemn tone, he announced, "I'm going to die."

Nico drew back, alarmed. "What?"

"I'm going to die, and there is nothing you can do about it." Jack sat back, a smug look on his face.

Nico blinked. "Are you sick?"

Jack ignored him. "Lucy's going to die. So's Ma and your dad. Matteo could fall off a building tomorrow. And Dante? He's gonna get hurt doing..." He frowned. "Whatever it is he does."

"Model railroad tycoon."

"Gourmet carrot farmer. Do you get where I'm going with this?"

Nico pinched the bridge of his nose. "I don't think you're supposed to say any of this to someone with anxiety." It was the first

time he'd admitted it aloud with the actual word. *Anxiety*. It was funny how the word itself caused its own definition.

"Of course not. Go talk to a therapist for the right things to say. I'm just a rock star." Jack mimed an air guitar chord. "But if everyone's going to die—which they are, and you'll have to deal with it—why not face those challenges with the love of your life by your side?"

Jack, with his bizarre, demonic reverse psychology, was right. Facing the future would always be better with Eli by his side. Nico perked up, but his mood fell just as quickly. "I already told him I don't love him."

"And we've already determined you're a terrible liar. Go back to Eli—who is also going to die, by the way—and win him back." Jack gave him a sly wink before tossing one last penny. It bounced on the edge of the glass before tipping in with a splash. "I, for one, recommend a good wooing."

# Chapter 24

It was seven in the morning when the rideshare dropped Nico at the beachside motel. He and Jack had stayed up most of the night, throwing old pennies into matching whiskey glasses. Each was lost in their own thoughts, but the camaraderie of silence between friends was all they needed. In those twilight moments, sitting in a hotel where so many others had come for solace, Nico made up his mind. Eli was his, and he was Eli's, and he would make it right.

Giddy with hope and sleeplessness, he thanked the driver and strode through the parking lot, making his way toward their motel room with a renewed hope that he hadn't felt in months, if ever.

From now on, things would be different.

From now on, he would live in the past, the present, and the future, and learn the lessons that they taught.

From now on, he would tell Eli every day how ardently he admired and loved him, and how until that morning, he had never known himself.

From now on, when his mind and anxiety tricked him like the wildest of ravens, he would take Eli's hand, and accept his help and love until he could whisper, "Nevermore."

From now on, he would love Eli with a passion that the gods themselves would envy, and only the force of a heavenly thunderbolt could separate them now.

And then he noticed that their room door was left ajar. Trepidation caused both his steps and his heart to stutter. He pushed the door open with light fingers, and the hinges emitted a mournful whine.

Inside, Eli's arms were wrapped around a woman, his face nestled in her shoulder. Her long blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Her pink-lipped smile radiated love and contentment. She seemed so relaxed, so utterly happy—not like the last time Nico had seen her, when she had been pale, frustrated, and wearing an extravagant wedding gown.

“Oh,” said Nico. One simple word that conveyed so much. *Oh, this is not what I was expecting. Oh, this is what it's like to be punched in the gut. Oh, this is what heartbreak feels like. Oh, oh, oh.*

Eli startled and whirled around, wiping at reddened eyes. “You're back,” he said. “Look who showed up.”

Nico stared at them, trying to remember how words worked. “I'm Nico,” he murmured.

She smiled, a wry grin that was beautiful when not strapped by stress and parental expectations. “I'm Audrey,” she said. “I remember you now from the wedding. Eli was just telling me about the trip.”

“The trip,” repeated Nico. His lips felt numb, and his ribs were turning to iron. *Five, four, three, two...two...*

Two eyes the color of cloudy sea glass looked at him with equal parts concern and heartbreak. “You alright?”

“I’m fine,” Nico managed, taking a few deep breaths.

“Audrey flew in last night to surprise me. She got the keys from Jaime and set up some necessities in the apartment.” Eli averted his eyes to the suitcase by the door. “We’re on our way there.”

This was goodbye then. How could he have expected anything else? It had been Eli and Audrey at the beginning; how fitting that it would end the same way.

Eli picked up the suitcase, but as his fingers wrapped around the handle, Nico grabbed his wrist and pulled him into his arms. He held him and didn’t speak to him, because what could he say that wasn’t already said with this embrace? His arms said *I love you, and I always will, and you are my everything.*

His mouth said, “Take care of him, Audrey.”

The woman in question made a startled noise, her gaze darting from Nico to Eli and back again. Nico didn’t care what she thought. All that mattered was that she took care of Eli.

He kissed Eli on the forehead and whispered, “*Ciao, bello.*” Then he sunk down on the bed and watched the love of his life walk out of the last hotel room they would ever share.

\* \* \*

Eli’s eyes were bleary but dry as he took in his new neighborhood through Audrey’s car windows. He glared at everything they passed, cataloging their part in his brand-new life. *There was his new drugstore. There was his new post office. There was his new street.*



Audrey pulled up outside the garage where Eli would be renting the small apartment attached to the side. *There was his new home.*

The entire property felt like a looking glass reflecting his personality back at him—a little messy, a little chaotic, a little depressed. Even the jumbled stack of used tires next to the garage bay doors seemed to say, “Look! We have the same cluttered energy!”

“So here we are,” said Eli, his tone careful and casual.

“Here we are,” repeated Audrey, taking his hand in hers. She still smelled like the rosewater lotion she used for her dry skin. The floral fragrance used to fill him with longing, even lust, but now, it only brought about comfort, warm and neutral.

“How long are you here?” he asked, dreading being alone in that bare apartment.

“As long as you need me,” she said. “I have all the time in the world. Dad wasn’t too happy with my resignation letter.”

His eyes widened. “Good for you. I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m sorry for the way they treated you. I’m sorry for the way I treated you because of them.”

Eli smiled, a half-hearted sign of his acceptance of her apology over things that no longer mattered anymore. He glanced back at the empty street, half-hoping to see a kaleidoscopic van and a pensive professor standing there with that wicked, secretive smirk. But no, Esmeralda was condemned in a junkyard, and Nico was on his way home.

*Home.* Eli looked at the sterile apartment door. This was home then. All he had to do was step out of the car and get on with it.

Audrey chewed on her thumbnail before blurting out, “Do you love him?”

“Yeah, I do.” Whatever he had felt for Audrey was barely an iota of the chasm of emotion he had for Nico.

“Well, that sucks.” Her eyes went glassy, and she sniffled.

“You’re right. It does suck.”

“You know, we spend so much time doing the wrong things for the right reason. I brought you back home because I loved you. Tried to fit you into a life that neither of us wanted.” Her voice wobbled. “I should have left you here because I loved you.”

Eli brought her hand to his lips, kissing the back. It wasn’t a romantic gesture, merely a shared expression of solidarity. “We worked it out in the end, didn’t we? A little dramatically, but we did it all the same.”

“We’re getting there.” Audrey blinked away the shine that had gathered in her eyes. “And now your boy is off doing the wrong thing for the right reason. One of you fuckers needs to do the right thing for the right reason.”

He barked out a laugh. After the sluggish sadness of the day, it felt like stretching out a misused muscle. “God, I’ve missed your mouthiness.”

“I haven’t cussed so much since we moved back. I think I scared the lady at the coffee shop this morning when I told her to make my latte a goddamned triple.” She shrugged. “I tipped her well.”

They sat together in the car, the windows rolled down enough to let a light breeze blow through. It was purgatory in a Porsche and he had no desire to leave the car and face his fate.

Eventually, Audrey said, “Eli, I think your mom knew we wouldn’t work out.”

“Oh?”

“She told me to take care of you. I thought that was just something people say when they’re dying, but then she added, ‘No matter what that means.’”

A wave of sadness hit Eli, but it wasn’t the usual sharp crest of inconsolable grief, merely an acknowledgment that he missed his mother. “Sounds like her.” He tightened his fingers around Audrey’s.

“You know,” she said, her eyes fastened on something far off in the distance. “I think Nico thought we were together.”

Eli froze. “What? Why would he think that? He’s been around the whole time we’ve been untangling this mess. He knows we’re done.”

“He had this look,” she said. With a regretful sigh, she continued. “I know I shouldn’t have broken us off the way I did. But Eli, I knew it was the right thing when I looked at your face that night. The right thing for the right reason, although my timing could have used some finesse. We were in front of hundreds of people and you only looked disappointed, and embarrassed. You didn’t look heartbroken. And that man this morning, when he came through that door and saw us hugging...well, he was heartbroken.”

“Oh, no.” Eli’s stomach turned to granite. “Why didn’t you say something?”

She had the grace to look guilty. “You were crying on my shoulder because he broke *your* heart. I didn’t know what to think, so I chose you.” Her eyes took on that despondent shine again. “Did I choose wrong?”

Eli sighed and squeezed her hand. “In the end, does it even matter? He doesn’t love me.”

“I’d say he does,” she said. “I think he’s just scared. Maybe he doesn’t know how to love you, and you’ve got to be the one to show him the way.”

Eli closed his eyes, picturing an old plaid blanket, a rumpled duvet, and murmured Shakespeare under a night sky as dark as black velvet and dotted with celestial diamonds. “But I am constant as the Northern Star...” he whispered to himself.

Audrey cocked her head, studying his face, and smiling at what she found there. “Hey, wanna go for a drive?”

And Eli, who had spent the last few weeks strapped in a dilapidated van and should want anything else in the world but that, said, “I think I do.”

# Chapter 25

“I want a sandwich,” mumbled Nico.

The attendant at the airport kiosk counter sent Nico a completely emotionless look. “Anything else?”

“No.” Nico scanned the fast-food menu above the attendant before holding up a hand. “Wait. I want a milkshake.”

Another drab stare. “What kind?”

“Erm.” He scratched at his neck, craning his neck toward the smudged display. “I don’t suppose you have s’mores flavor?”

“We have chocolate, strawberry, and vanilla.”

Well, it wasn’t quite as decadent as Eli’s eclectic tastes, but that didn’t matter anymore. “All three. Mix it up.”

The young woman blinked at him. “Sir, our machine doesn’t work like that.”

He made a minor harrumphing noise. “Fine. Give me all three.”

He sat down in the food court and shoved the sandwich in his mouth. His throat was tight, and he could barely swallow, but he made himself do it because he was trying to fix himself, right? Maybe not for Eli anymore, not after this morning, but he was going to do it, damn it all to hell. He drank at least half of each milkshake until he felt bloated and queasy. This kind of food just tasted better at a

cheap diner on the side of a dusty road. In the airport, it was barely grease and sawdust.

The old Nico would have welcomed this time alone, waiting for his flight while the hum of airport activity provided faint background noise as he cataloged and tapped away at his laptop. New Nico tried, pulling out his notes for a section on foreshadowing elements and symbols, but he couldn't get into it, couldn't get into the fallacy of it all. He'd taught college kids how to comb through the written word, plucking out symbols and meaning, and in the end, what did it matter? Fuck all. Real life happened with no warning, no symbols to give you a hand. Cars crashed and grooms fainted and people fell in love and ex-girlfriends showed up and it all just happened and you had to deal with it. No signs. No oracles. No premonitions or symbols.

Nico tossed the notebook to the bench beside him and slouched back against the cold metal. Staring ahead at an electronic billboard that blinked between the bright green light of a rental car logo and an advertisement for Los Angeles Angels tickets, he settled in for the long wait until his flight time.

After a few moments, his phone rang. He wanted to ignore it and sit in a haze of mourning until his flight, but his father's name flashed across the screen.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey," said Ben. Nico felt his tension ease just a little. His mother's voice, even if she were scolding him, always made him feel safe. His father's, on the other hand, was as calming as an ocean

breeze. “I just wanted to let you know that Nonna and Nonno are in town this weekend. I’m sure they’d love to see you when you get in.”

Nico didn’t think he could manage seeing his grandparents, not without thinking of the breakfast that had set everything in motion. “I think I just want to go home and rest up. But thanks for letting me know.”

“Sure, that’s fine too.” His father hesitated. “You okay?”

Nico wanted to say that he was tired of being asked if he was “okay,” that this had just been a year of people asking him if he was “okay.” What the hell did “okay” even mean anymore? But he simply said, “No.”

“Oh, Nico,” his father sighed. “I’m so sorry your trip didn’t end the way you’d planned. But it was just an accident, and you’ll—”

“It’s not the accident,” interrupted Nico.

“Oh?” his father asked, and then he paused, waiting for Nico. He never pushed his children into conversations; rather, he was just there, waiting for their words until they were ready to be spoken.

Nico’s throat tightened, and he felt all of ten years old again. “Remember Bambi?”

“The movie?”

“No.” Nico’s laugh was watery. “The fawn.”

“Oh.” There was a sharp inhale over the phone. “Oh, no. Buddy, I know the western United States has a lot of unique wildlife that we don’t have here in Indiana, but that doesn’t mean you can just rescue—”

“Dad. I didn’t fall in love with another deer. I just...fell in love. Period.”

Another long pause. “I love you very much, but I am so lost right now.”

“Me too, Dad. Look, I’ll tell you everything when I get home. And I’ll think about visiting, okay?”

“Sure.” Another one of his dad’s patient interludes. “You know, taking care of Bambi back then, and then giving him up—that took a lot of courage. It’s been thirty years, and I’m still proud of you.”

“Thanks.” That damn lump in his throat was not going away.

“But,” his dad continued, “deer are deer. Deers? Deerses? No, deer was right.” As usual, there was no question that this was definitely the man who sired Matteo. “Deer are deer. Like with many animals, sometimes we have to step in and make the hard decisions. But people are different. I don’t know what’s going on in your head right now, so maybe I’m off base entirely...but when a decision involves more than one person, it isn’t really fair for only one person to be the decision-maker.”

And that’s exactly what Nico had done. As he ended the call with his perceptive father, his mind flashed to a tiny motel bathroom and a conversation spoken to the rhythm of snipping shears. He’d made a decision all on his own, and it ended up being wrong. He truly had thought he was right at the time, that sacrificing his own happiness in favor of giving Eli an easy life was the only way to go. But there was no happy ending this time, no saving all of China. He had made the wrong decision, and now he was destined to be alone.

\* \* \*



Nico could have boarded early, but by this late in the afternoon, his attitude about life had gone from “what’s the point?” to “really, what’s the point?” He shuffled onto the airplane, throwing his carry-on in the overhead compartment and flopping down into his seat. At least it was the aisle, and he’d be able to stretch out his left leg for comfort. A teenager sat on his right, playing on his phone with earbuds in. Good—a preoccupied teenager was the perfect travel companion. He settled in, strapped his seat belt, and closed his eyes.

He wasn’t full-on terrified of flying, but he absolutely hated the takeoff and landing. If he tried to fall asleep beforehand, though, he usually made it through takeoff happily in dreamland and not white knuckling his armrest.

But this time, sleep didn’t come. He squeezed his eyes tighter, but that only made him more aware of every noise, every jostle of passengers and attendants against his elbow, every beep and bell. Eventually, it meant he was awake and gritting his teeth through takeoff, the grinding shrieks and hellish bumps reminding him of a February ice storm and a curvy road. His heart began to thrash about in his chest.

*Five things you can see.* He opened his eyes, blinking at the harsh brightness of the cabin. He looked at the folded tray table, his laptop bag between his ankles, the “Seat Belt On” indicator light, a flight attendant smiling in the distance, the safety instruction pamphlet in the seat pocket.

*Four things you can touch.* His jeans. The ridges on the armrest. The slippery chrome seat belt fastener. *Brown-sugar hair flowing like*

*silk through his fingers.*

*Three things you can hear.* The decisive click as someone closed their window shade. The pages of the book the teenager was reading, his phone now tucked away. *A laugh that made you feel like the luckiest person in the room.*

*Two things you can smell. Sandalwood and chocolate syrup.*

*One thing you can taste. One thing you can taste. One thing you can—*

He stopped. There was no need to continue. He was calm, and “the acrid taste of heartbreak and despair” was too melodramatic of an answer, even if it were true.

Nico pulled out his laptop and began to write, creating a rough draft outline of one of the sections of his research. He made it through one paragraph before giving up. He brought up a blank document and began what he envisioned would be a goodbye letter.

*Dear Eli,* he began, and from there, his fingers danced over the keys, expressing his gratitude for the other man’s presence in his life, however brief. He kept it light, sticking to memories of giant metal whales and snuffling donkeys rather than hope and consequent heartbreak.

Someone poked at his shoulder. “Can you type a little slower?” The teenager beside him glared through overgrown bangs. “I can barely concentrate on this stupid book when it’s quiet, let alone when you’re smashing your fingers on the keys.”

Nico winced. “Sorry.”

“Ugh.” The teen sank back against his headrest, but kept a watchful, dark-eyed gaze on Nico. “Who’s Eli?”

Nico jolted at the other man's name. "Excuse me?"

The teen shrugged. "I needed a break. And I can see your screen." He tapped on the laptop screen to prove his point.

"That's...not okay." Nico rubbed at the fingerprint the boy had left behind.

Another shrug. "Is he your ex?"

"No." He rubbed at his temple. "Yes. It's complicated."

"It always is, man."

Nico glanced at the book in the boy's hands. "You're reading *Frankenstein*?"

"For English class." The teen's eye roll was so exaggerated that Nico was surprised his head didn't roll off too. "It's so much fun."

"Fuck, yeah." Nico cleared his throat. "I mean, uh, gee golly, it sure is."

"I'm sixteen. I know what cussing is."

"Fuck. Right." Nico plucked the book from the boy's hand. It was a generic trade paperback, but that didn't matter. All the good stuff was still there. "You really don't like it?"

"It sucks. There's no one to cheer for. It's just a bunch of overdramatic people making obvious mistakes." He counted off on his fingers. "And that's only ten words. Eleven if I don't use the contraction. I need 990 more for my report."

"Well. Look at what you just said."

"I need 990 more?"

It was Nico's turn to roll his eyes. "No, the thing about overdramatic people making obvious mistakes. One of the themes of the book is that Victor has the hubris—"

“The what?”

“The hubris. Like, being too self-confident and arrogant. Victor has the hubris to take on nature, creating a monster, and as a result, a lot of people get hurt. It’s obvious to the reader that he shouldn’t do this, but he still does. An overdramatic person making an obvious mistake.”

Something familiar pinged around Nico’s brain like a pinball, too fast for him to catch, but he knew it was important.

“Oh yeah?” The boy pulled a notebook and pen from his bag. “What else?”

Nico shook his head. “I’m not doing your paper for you.”

“C’mon. I’ll still read the book. Just give me one more theme. Guide my scholarly ambitions.”

Nico studied him. “What’s your name?”

“Trevor. Yours?”

“Nico.” He held out his hand for a quick shake.

“And you’re good at this shit, right?”

“Homework?”

“No, I mean books and stuff.”

Nico rubbed at his temple. “I’m a professor of literature. I have to be.”

“Jackpot.” Trevor fist-pumped the air.

“Fine.” Nico knew full well he was being played, but it was nice to have the distraction. Besides, he hadn’t been in a lecture hall since his accident, and this felt familiar and comfortable. “There’s also a theme of isolation throughout the book. In creating his monster, Victor ends up focusing so much on the creature that he alienates

himself from those he loves. He has no connection to family or friends or even human society, and is solely fixated on the pursuit of knowledge and the creature itself. As a result, he ends up hurting everyone and is left...all...alone.”

*Oh.*

*Oh no.*

Nico stared at Trevor.

Trevor stared at Nico.

Nico put his face in his hands. “Fuck me, I’m Victor Frankenstein.”

“What?”

“I’m him. I did that.” He smacked his palm on the book’s cover. “I did that! I’m doing that right now!”

Trevor looked at him, and sighed. “This is about Eli, isn’t it?”

Nico groaned into his palms. “Yes.”

“Nico?”

“What?” He peered through his fingers at the teen, who was giving him a smug, knowing glance.

“Did you do the hubris?”

He groaned again. “Yes. Oh God, I did all the hubris.”

“And you’re hubris-ing right now?”

“It’s not a verb, but yes, I am.”

“Alright.” Trevor wagged his fingers in a beckoning manner. “Tell me about it.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m good at figuring out this stuff. I got Lea Martin and DeShaun Barrett back together after they broke up at homecoming.

And they were the king and queen! I'm pretty much a relationship legend."

Nico stared up at the overhead reading light. "Oh my God. This is really my life."

"Yep." Trevor patted his shoulder. "Hubris and all. Now spill."

And Nico, who had nothing else to lose, told his entire story to a precocious teenager while flying 30,000 feet above the route that had led him to this very moment.

When he reached the end of the story, Trevor tutted under his breath. "Overdramatic people making obvious mistakes." He grimaced at Nico. "You know, for as old as you are, I'd think you'd have this angsty stuff behind you."

Nico scowled. "I'm thirty-nine, thank you very much. And heartbreak isn't just for younger people, you know."

Trevor tapped the paperback. "Between you and Dr. Frankie here, I'm so looking forward to being an adult."

"Eh, it has its positives." Nico waved his hand. "Now, since you're such a romance sage, tell me what to do. Work your Lea and DeShaun magic."

"Oh. Well, I told DeShaun that Lea was getting real close with Merrick, and he panicked and took her to the gazebo behind the bus garage. The gazebo never fails."

"The gazebo never fails." Nico tugged at the ends of his hair. "Well, the next time I'm wooing someone at Sweet Valley Sunnydale Rydell High, I'll remember that. In the meantime..."

Trevor grinned. "Hubris clean-up." He leaned over Nico's lap to speak with the attendant who had just stopped at their aisle. "The

gentleman will have a red wine, and I'll have a Sprite."

"I'll what?"

The attendant filled a glass with red wine and another with Sprite. As soon as she had moved to the next aisle, Trevor swapped their glasses and gulped the wine down in one swallow.

"Hey—" Nico protested.

Trevor slammed the wine cup on his tray, although it only made a plastic thunk instead of any dramatic effect. "Okay, let's start this letter again."

"What about your homework?"

"Hubris, alienation, isolation from society, monsters, blah blah blah. I can work with all that. This is more exciting." He tapped at the laptop screen, leaving yet another fingerprint. "Fix this part, it's too neutral. You have to beg, dude. Apologize and grovel. You did the hubris, after all."

Nico sighed and backspaced the line that Trevor had pointed out. He began to ask what he should say next when he heard the last voice he expected to hear at that moment, and the first voice he wanted to hear every day for the rest of his life.

"Excuse me, but do you have milkshakes on this flight? Because I am really craving a vanilla one."

# Chapter 26

Eli was here. Eli was *here*. Nico grabbed the back of Eli's seat and yanked himself to a standing position. Sure enough, there was Eli, gray-blue eyes looking at him expectantly in the seat just in front of him.

The attendant gave him a concerned look. "Sir, the seat belt light is still on. I'm gonna have to ask you to sit down."

*What?* Airplane rules weren't supposed to exist while his dreams were finally coming true. "But—"

She held up a placating palm. "Once the captain turns the seat belt light off, you can move around the cabin."

"But—" he spluttered again, gesturing frantically at Eli. Eli's eyes bounced between Nico and the attendant, an amused smirk on his face.

"Please sit down." Her tone reminded him of his mother, and that was terrifying enough to make him sit down. He leaned forward and tugged Eli to face him. Both their bodies curled around the back of Eli's seat as they strained against their seat belts.

Even as the metal clasp dug into his hip bone, Nico couldn't help smiling. "Eli."



Eli pursed his lips, but Nico caught the flickered movement of a lip curling upward. “Nico.”

A body muscled its way across Nico’s legs, catching his right kneecap. “That’s Eli?” asked Trevor, eyes lit with curiosity.

“Sit down,” said Nico, pushing the boy back into his seat. “The seat belt light’s still on.”

Eli glanced at the teenager. “You must be Trevor.”

Trevor’s eyes widened. “How do you know that?”

“I’m only a row away. I could hear everything.” Eli sent Nico a meaningful gaze. “Everything.”

Nico tried to remember everything he and Trevor had discussed, but his brain kept repeating, *Eli is here, Eli is here!* like a nursery rhyme stuck on repeat. “Did you—did you stowaway again?”

Eli blinked. “Yes, I told a sob story to my seatmate here and she snuck me in her carry-on.” He shook his head and glanced at the ceiling. “No, I bought a ticket like everyone else!”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was going to, but your eyes were closed when I got on, and you looked so tense that I didn’t want to shock you into feeling...” He bit his lip, and his eyes darted toward Trevor. “Disconcerted.”

*Ah, God, this man.* He had stayed silent so that he didn’t startle Nico into a panic attack. Nico didn’t deserve him.

“And after that,” Eli continued, “you were talking to the kid, and honestly, it was so entertaining...” His voice trailed off and he shrugged. “I got distracted.”

Nico couldn’t help his smile. Of course, Eli would get distracted during his own grand gesture. Still, “Eli, God, I’m so—” Nico stopped,

unable to find the right words. Sorry didn't seem strong enough.

Trevor poked his arm. "Bet you wish you had a gazebo now."

Nico swatted him away and searched Eli's face. "Why are you here?"

Eli inhaled deeply, and those sea glass eyes met Nico's. "Because despite the fact that you have a martyr complex the size of South America and the stubbornness of an Oatman burro, apparently, I've fallen in love with you."

"I do not have a martyr—" Nico stopped as twin thrills of heat and cold danced a pas de deux between his shoulder blades. "What? Really?"

"Yes, your stubbornness is really unmatched. You could win a stubbornness Olympics."

"No, I mean, you really love me? Even after everything?"

At last, Eli's expression softened. "I do."

"Me."

"Yes, you. Professor Nico Duncan Meyer—"

"That's not even close to my middle name."

"I've only known you for a few weeks. I had to improvise. Now, Professor Nico—"

"Benjamin. It's Benjamin. After my dad."

"Well, that is very sweet. Now, Professor Nico 'I will flick you in the face if you interrupt me again' Meyer, I'm here because I love you. I love you with all of my heart. Full stop." Eli stared at him, his confident expression faltering. "Well?"

"You said you would flick me in the face if I interrupted you again." Eli reached out, his fingers bent and ready to flick, but Nico

caught them in his own, pressing a kiss to the fingertips. "I love you too, Eli 'whatever your middle name is' Tenney." He frowned, a twinge in his chest reminding him of an empty hotel room. "What about Audrey?"

"Still friends," Eli said softly. "Scout's honor."

Eli's words cut through his worry and envy like sun through morning fog. "Is it wrong that I love you this much after only a few weeks?" asked Nico.

"Nico, darling, when have we ever done anything normal?"

And Eli was right. Some people needed first dates, structured love confessions, and an appropriate amount of time between all relationship milestones. All they needed was a rainbow van and a road map.

"What if I can't take care of you?" asked Nico.

"If we do this," Eli waved between them, "then we do it together. We can work on ourselves together, and if that means a few struggles to become ourselves, then we struggle together. We take care of each other when the other needs it most."

Nico dropped his head, unable to speak for the lump in his throat. Eli caught his chin and tilted his head till their eyes met.

"Together then," murmured Nico.

Trevor coughed beside them. "I believe it was Mary Shelley who once said, 'Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it.'"

"Not bad." Nico clapped the boy on his shoulder, even though Trevor was just reading from the blurb on the back of *Frankenstein*.

"Eh," said Trevor. "I still don't like the book."

The seat belt sign dimmed with a chime of announcement. Never before had two dull electronic tones sounded so beautiful. Nico and Eli fumbled with their buckles and leaped to their feet. Nico threw his arms around Eli and yanked him close, his mouth slamming onto his.

After a moment, Nico pulled back, blinking dazedly down at him. "So? You want to defend my accumulation of anguish then?"

Eli smiled at him, the tips of their noses touching like reunited butterflies. "I love when you talk literary to me."

Nico kissed him again, and despite the catcall from one side of the cabin, the giggles from the other, and Trevor's whispered "Bruh," Nico had found his one thing he could taste, and it tasted a lot like hope.

\* \* \*

"And I'm back to just these," Eli said, holding up his wallet and phone as they prepared to disembark the plane. "Why do I even have possessions anymore?"

Nico allowed Trevor to squeeze past him so that he had extra time to walk at his own pace down the aisle. Trevor had wished them good luck, and Nico had responded with, "Keep studying," which was the most cliché, professor-y thing he could have said.

"Where's your stuff?" Nico asked.

"This was a spur-of-the-moment grand thing, if you must know," said Eli. "Audrey can send my stuff along. I've got a feeling she's going to take the apartment for herself, if you and I worked out."

Nico snagged his wrist as he slid his wallet back into his pocket, studying the beat-up leather. “Oh, God,” he smacked his forehead. “It’s A for Angels. I can’t believe I didn’t figure it out till now.” *Adorable, amazing, adventurous* had all run through his head. *All mine* was his current favorite.

“Psh, of course!” Eli looked at him like he’d just uttered blasphemy. “The Los Angeles Angels are the best team ever. I used to have season tickets and everything.” He tapped his chin. “Good thing I didn’t sign back up for those.”

“We might still be able to manage a game or two,” said Nico, following Eli down the aisle. “I *am* in the market for a new van.”

Eli glanced back at him over his shoulder, his eyes wide with hope, and excitement for a future adventure. Eli followed him down the ramp and into the Indianapolis airport. When they were near baggage claim, Nico pulled Eli close to him for one last hug. “Are you ready for this?” asked Nico, unsure of his own answer to that loaded question.

“Always,” said Eli.

They walked to the baggage claim, where a figure with a dark, messy braid, an old Foreigner shirt, and a phone to her ear waited for them. Lucy’s body was tense, but as her eyes caught Eli’s, she relaxed.

“They’re here,” she said into the phone. “Yes, I did say ‘they.’” She tilted the phone away from her lips. “Jack says hello. He also said that he’s glad you’re not being dramatic jackasses anymore.” A garbled voice came through the phone, and she replied, “Well, you

didn't say *not* to repeat that." She continued to speak into the device, holding her finger up in a 'wait one moment' gesture.

Nico didn't need to wait one moment, though, because just then, his mother and father walked up to join them in the baggage claim area.

"Oh," said Lucy, cupping her hand over the phone speaker. "We're all here to surprise you. Act surprised."

Rose shook her head and clasped her arms around Nico's neck. "Welcome home," she said. His father wrapped his arms around them, a sandwich hug that recalled the brief time, nearly four decades ago, when it had been just the three of them—a seedling of a family.

But that seedling had grown, and grown, and then grown probably more than modern birth control should have allowed. And now, Nico's branch was finally starting to take leaf. He reached his hand out for Eli, who took it with trepidation. "Better to meet them all at once," he whispered. Eli clenched his fingers, his face shell-shocked.

Before he could introduce Eli officially, though, a veritable army of Meyer siblings descended upon them like crows on a cornfield.

"Sorry we're late," Lettie began, juggling a fussy Gigi in her arms. "We were snacking in the food court, and then she needed her diaper changed, and believe me, this was a five-wipe diaper change, so it took a while and then—"

"It's okay." Nico gave her a hug and took Gigi from her. "I really, really don't need the details." The baby naturally reached for his beard, though there wasn't quite as much for her to tug at anymore.

“Dude, you look awesome,” said Matteo, reaching over the baby and messing up Nico’s hair. “Such a grown-up gentleman.”

Nico opened his mouth to introduce Eli, but was instead bombarded with his three other sisters.

“Sophia,” he said to the darker-haired of the twins. “Way to make a last-minute appearance.”

“This is my only free weekend until Thanksgiving,” she said, flicking her dark hair from her shoulders. “So good timing on crashing the van.”

“About that.” Nico glanced at Elena. “I’m sorry about your artwork being destroyed.”

She let out a buoyant laugh. “There are plenty of other surfaces to paint in this world. Besides, that left-hand wall in your garage looks nice and blank.”

“No,” he said firmly before turning to Ariana. “What are you doing here?”

“Yeah, I love you too,” she said with a sarcastic smirk. “I drove Nonna and Nonno up.” She tilted her head toward Eli. “Just a carjacker, then?”

“Eh, his criminal behavior grew on me.” He wrapped an arm around Eli’s waist and tugged him closer. With Eli in one arm, and Gigi climbing the other like a headstrong koala, he felt the last, lonely piece of him click into place. He was loved. He was home.

Behind the gaggle of sisters, Dante’s eyes bounced between Eli and Nico before he shrugged and lifted his bottle of ginger ale in a salute of acceptance. Nico took it as his cue to finally introduce the man beside him.

Handing Gigi back to her mother, he turned to his family and began. “Everyone, this is—” He stopped. Where could he even begin?

*This is Eli, who fights tornadoes for a handful of research notes.*

*This is Eli, who explores caverns just to bring stories back to those who can't.*

*This is Eli, who finds the simplest joys in milkshakes and wild burros and campsite sunsets, and who, for some insane, unknown reason, loves me with every bit of his heart.*

He swallowed, his eyes pricking with tears of happy exhaustion. “Everyone, this is...my Eli.”

\* \* \*

Nine sets of eyes blinked at Eli and Nico. Nine and a half, if you included the half-asleep squint from the blonde cherub. Eli's hands trembled, his palms clammy against Nico's own dry, warm fingers.

“Hello,” he said slowly, and the world exploded. Suddenly, he was surrounded by *Hi* and *Hello* and *It's so good to meet you* and *We're happy you're here*, spinning round him like a tornado.

Eli wanted to cry, and he didn't have any idea why. Maybe it was because it had just been a long, emotional day. Maybe it was because he was surrounded by the pure essence of what family meant, and such a strong dose was playing havoc with his emotions. And maybe, just maybe, part of him thought that stepping into the midst of this family meant walking away from his own.



*Look at it piece by piece, he heard in his mother's crisp voice. See each little part of a whole as a miracle.*

And so he did. He saw Rose's determination and Ben's easy humor. He saw Lettie's protectiveness, Matteo's goofiness, and Lucy's gentle understanding. He saw Dante's perception, Ariana's bravery, Sophia's snark, and Elena's optimism. And beyond that, he saw something that, in a day mixed with heartbreak and happiness, made the tears spill over his lashes at last.

An elderly couple was headed their way, taking small but steady steps through the crowds of travelers. Their hands were animated, their conversation enthusiastic and melodic, and entirely in Italian. As they joined the Meyers, Eli's gaze met clear, wise eyes the color of the Mediterranean.

"Caro," said Claudia with a knowing smile. "There you are."

He went to her, kissing her lightly on the cheek. "Here I am, at last." Thousands of miles had come and gone, and Eli had ended up right back where he'd started, and yet, this was the beginning of a new life, just like he had wanted.

She wrapped her arms around him and pulled him tight. "Come on, Eli," said Claudia. "We won't leave without you."

Eli sniffled, and as he followed the family, tears of grief and loss, but also hope and love, trailed down his face like stardust.

## Chapter 27

The road followed the creek, and the man followed the road. Gliding back and forth like a silken ribbon, the road cut across the endless Indiana farmlands, where the green tips of the newly seeded corn peeked through the winter-rested soil.

Nico walked along the pavement, his footsteps parallel to the uniform lines. Toe to heel, over and over. *Left, right, left, right, left;* and if his left occasionally twisted to the side, there was no one around to say anything. It was his dance now, a striding cadence that was all his own.

Ahead, the country road led to a grouping of sycamores, flashes of green peering through the dormant branches. Nico stepped off the road, balancing on a fallen tree limb to cross the ditch and over into a cleared thicket.

A group of familiar men sat on scattered logs, circled around a smoldering campfire. Nico took his place on an oak tree stump and smiled at his companions.

“S’more?” asked Darcy, though his mouth was full, so it came out more like “S’mahh?”

“Of course,” said Nico.

Scrooge handed him a freshly sharpened stick, and Zeus tossed him a few marshmallows from a bag at his side. Nico skewered the marshmallow, holding it over the fire as the flames licked along the side of the gooey treat.

“You know, I always say, speak softly and carry a big stick,” said a man next to Mr. Darcy. “I suppose a marshmallow skewer counts.”

“Teddy Roosevelt?” Nico frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“Fuck if I know,” said the mustachioed president, licking melted chocolate from his thumb.

“Like you’ve ever spoken softly in your life,” said Zeus.

Teddy scowled at him before wiping chocolate onto the god’s snow-white toga.

“So, Nico,” said Zeus, appraising him with wise, silvered eyes. “Here we are. You’ve completed your journey. You found true love and adventure. I suppose it’s safe to say that we’re at the happily-ever-after portion of your tale?”

“I hope not,” said Nico. “I don’t just want happily ever after with Eli. I want his grumpily ever afters and sadly ever afters and angrily ever afters and annoyingly ever afters too. I want it all, and the adventures and journeys that come with them.”

“Well said. Then I guess this is goodbye,” Zeus said, standing and stretching. “It’s been...well, it’s been something.”

“I suppose I’ll miss you, but as you’re not real, I’m not sure what that says for my sanity.”

“Sanity is overrated anyway,” said Roosevelt. “But should you need us again—”

“He never needed you, you big bear,” muttered Scrooge. “You just showed up for the free s’mores.”

Roosevelt shrugged, popped another marshmallow into his mouth, and faded from existence.

Darcy stood and held out a hand to Nico. “You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire you and love you.” He blinked, then cast his eyes downward. “Huh. That really doesn’t have the same effect here, does it?”

“It’s okay, buddy,” Nico said, patting Darcy’s hand. “I admire and love you too.”

The brooding Regency hero beamed at him before disappearing into thin air.

“And I supposed you’re going to say, ‘God bless us, everyone’?” Nico asked as Scrooge approached him.

“Of course not,” Scrooge grumbled. “I was going to say, you owe me seven pounds for the marshmallows and supplies.” He stuffed a graham cracker into his mouth, clapped Nico on the shoulder, and faded away.

And there, at the end of it all, Zeus and Nico were alone once again. They gazed at the lush sycamore trees as the campfire popped and crackled.

“Knowing how it turns out, would you do it again?” asked Zeus softly.

In his peripheral vision, Nico could see a glossy patch of ice, a dark ditch, and blood on a leather car seat, but when he turned to look, they weren’t there. Instead, a single raven stood on one of the

tree stumps, his head cocked to the side as if to say, *Well? Go on and answer him.*

“And the end result is Eli?” Nico asked. Zeus nodded once. “Always.”

“Good,” said Zeus. “I’m going to go then. You don’t need me anymore.”

“I don’t suppose I could ask you to go haunt my brothers’ dreams for a while?”

“Gods, no.” Zeus shuddered. “Matteo would just play that damn banjo and Dante is terrifying. He looks like Mafia Hozier. Besides, I only exist in your head, you dingbat.”

“Fair enough.” Nico swallowed against an unwelcome tightness in his throat. “You know, I think I’ll miss you most of all.”

“I know.” Zeus reached into his toga and drew out a pair of aviator sunglasses. Sliding them on, he shot Nico finger guns and disappeared back into the ethereal niches of Nico’s imagination.

Nico turned to the raven, and they watched each other as the campfire dwindled into dust and ashes. When the last ember died, they tipped their heads in respect to each other, and the raven flew away into the copse of sycamore trees.

\* \* \*

Nico startled awake, opening his eyes to find Eli peering at him with concern from the opposite pillow.

“You okay?” said Eli, sweeping messy tendrils off Nico’s forehead. “You were dreaming.”

Nico blinked away the fog of sleep. “Yeah, I think I am.”

Eli’s shoulders relaxed, and he snuggled into the hollow junction of Nico’s neck and shoulder. “Good dream?”

Nico smiled. “Yeah, it was.” He kissed Eli’s temple. “What about you?”

Eli scrunched up his nose. “I had a dream that I was in this huge comfy bed.”

“Oh, yeah?” Nico tugged him closer in their own huge, comfy bed. Eli had come home with him after landing at the airport, and had never left. After three months, Nico couldn’t imagine it being anything other than *their* bed.

“Yeah,” said Eli, stifling a yawn and ultimately failing. “And I was sleeping with lions.”

“Huh.” Nico frowned. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean.”

Eli shrugged, his eyes drifting shut again. “Does it have to mean anything?”

Nico smiled, clearing his mind of gods and ravens. “I guess not.”

Taking Eli’s hand in his, Nico nestled back into his pillow, took a deep breath, and counted backward from five, for no other reason than that he could.

*Five perfect fingers, clutched in his.*

*Four perfect freckles along his jaw.*

*Three bumps of a childhood scar on his elbow.*

*Two perfect blue-gray eyes, the color of a stormy sea.*

*And one perfect mouth, ready for kissing.*

“You’re sure you’re okay? Do you need anything?” asked Eli, his voice already slurred with sleep.

Nico pressed a simple kiss to his forehead. “Merely this,” he murmured. “And nothing more.”

Nico really was okay, in every sense of the word. His leg ached a little, but that was okay.

Later, he would finish up the last of his research draft and send it on to the dean. If she liked it, great, if not, that was okay too.

Tomorrow, he had another appointment with his new therapist. He had good visits and bad visits, and that was normal. That was okay.

Because when it came to it, he loved Eli, and that made things okay. He loved him like a treasured first edition of a rare book. He wanted to stay up late with him, hidden under the sheets in dim light, reading every page of him, learning and relearning his story, his chapters, his inner monologues and whispered dialogues, and spending every day grateful that he was included in the happily-ever-after epilogue.

And from now on, Nico would follow Eli, and Eli would follow Nico, from one journey to the next, from one adventure to another. They were each other’s North Star, and whether their road took them through sorrow and loneliness, or contentment and happiness, they would be together until the end of the trail.

# Epilogue

“Reader, I married him.”

Nico peeked over the edge of *Jane Eyre* to check if Gianna was asleep at last, and there she was, sprawled like a drunk butterfly, arms splayed across both his and Eli’s chests. These moments were the best perk of being an uncle—all the snuggles and none of the rest. Lettie was on her first date in over two years, and he’d babysit for a whole week if it meant bringing her stress down to a reasonable level.

Though he was happy in his suburban house with Eli at his side and Eli’s shoes strewn on the floor, Nico always loved the steady drumming of rain on the old wooden siding of his sister Lettie’s farmhouse.

“Are you sure you don’t want kids?” Eli whispered, winding one of Gianna’s honey-colored curls around his finger.

“Honey, you bring enough good old-fashioned chaos to my life to make up for fifty kids,” murmured Nico, pressing a kiss to Eli’s temple. Eli’s lips formed a moue of agreement.

A commotion outside broke through Nico’s slack blissfulness. The sound of stomping footsteps on the wraparound porch had him



sitting up, Eli following the motion. Gigi startled in their arms, lifting her head with a disgruntled expression.

“What is—” Eli began.

The front door slammed open, hitting the wall so hard that a framed picture of Lettie and Gigi fell and crashed to the floor. A thickly accented voice boomed in the entryway. “*Bonjour, motherfuckers!*”

Eli grabbed Gigi and held her tight to his chest while Nico strode into the other room. A man stood in the hall, wobbling slightly on his feet. Wild blue eyes looked from Eli to Nico and back again.

“Violetta,” he said weakly. “Your hair. It is different.” He reached out to pet Nico’s beard, who swatted him away.

“Excuse me?” asked Eli, standing behind Nico, rocking the toddler in his arms. “How do you know Lettie?”

“Lettie?” The man worked his mouth as if tasting the word. “Lettie. I like it.” He blinked and stared at Eli. “Where is Violetta? Where is Lettie?” His eyes narrowed at the toddler in Eli’s arms. To Nico’s surprise, Gigi reached her arms out toward the stranger with a drooling smile.

“No, honey,” murmured Eli. “We don’t make friends with the scary French hipster.”

“Who are you?” Nico demanded again, struggling to get control of the situation.

The man blocked Nico’s face from view with his hand, muttering, “*Va te faire foutre!*” under his breath. He leaned closer and brushed a hand over one of Gigi’s golden curls before Eli snatched her

backward. Frowning, the man reached for one of his own blond tendrils that had escaped from his messy topknot.

Nico stepped in front of the man, blocking Eli and Gianna. "I'm going to call the police," he said, pulling his phone from his pocket. "I suggest you don't move."

"Yeah," snarled Eli. "My fiancé here wrestled a bear once! Nico, show him the bite marks on your leg."

Nico gave him a funny look as the phone rang through the speaker. "I haven't proposed."

"Dude," hissed Eli. "I'm adding dramatic flair so we look tougher."

"Fine." He turned to the stranger just as the sheriff's office picked up. "I fought a bear for my fiancé. With my bare hands."

"And he fought with his bear hands," added Eli.

"Not the time, honey," said Nico.

"And I know karate!"

The stranger crossed his arms. "I only know half of the words that you are speaking."

"Well, that's disappointing," Eli sighed.

"What's this about a bear fight?" said a voice from the phone.

Nico held it to his ear. "Sorry, Sheriff," he said, never removing his eyes from the stranger. "No bears. But I'm at Lettie Meyer's house, and a strange man just broke in."

"What is happening?" Lettie's voice rang out as she flew in the door, surprisingly nimble for a woman in three-inch heels. "Where's Gianna?" She skidded to a stop as the stranger turned to face her, her mouth forming a perfect "O."

"*You,*" she breathed, her face pale.

“*Moi*,” he sneered back, bending over in a mock bow.

“He just showed up,” Eli told her. “Nico’s on the phone with the sheriff.”

“Nico, you can hang up,” she said slowly. “It’s okay.”

Nico studied her, questioning her thin lips and blank eyes, but in the end, he agreed. “Sorry to bother you, Bill,” he said, ending the call with great reluctance.

Lettie circled the blond man, her eyes never leaving his face. “You look terrible. You might as well sit down.”

Eli made a noise like an elephant whose trunk had just been crushed. “Lettie!”

“He’s harmless.” She kicked her heels off into the hallway and went into the kitchen. The three men followed her like disorganized acolytes, though Nico made sure to place himself between the stranger and his family. Lettie moved mechanically to the coffee maker and started a new pot.

“Lettie?” Eli ventured. “It’s a little late at night for coffee.”

She punched the brew button on the coffee machine in response. As the coffee hissed and dripped into the carafe, she said, “Eli, Nico, this is...well, actually, I’m not sure what to call him.” There was an iciness to her tone that made Nico, for a very brief moment, feel sorry for the stranger.

“I think he would have been better off with the police,” whispered Eli into Nico’s ear. Nico dipped his head in agreement.

The man who had so vibrantly yelled earlier was now as solemn as a pallbearer. Maybe he knew that tone in Lettie’s voice as well. “André. My name is André.”

“André.” His sister’s smile was not friendly as she picked out a green apple from a bowl on the counter. With her other hand, she plucked a paring knife from a drawer. Nico and Eli took a step back.

“*André*,” she repeated. The emphasis she put on his name was nearly mocking.

“Who the fuck is André?” asked Eli in a bewildered tone, staring between the two.

“Apparently, *he’s* André.” Lettie pointed at the man with her knife. She frowned as he awkwardly grasped the back of a chair. “I told you to sit down.”

He pulled out the chair and fell into it. She placed the apples in front of him. “Now eat.”

“Violetta—Lettie—” he began, but she made a tsking noise and he fell silent, picking up an apple slice with trembling fingers.

“I’m about to witness a murder, aren’t I?” mumbled Eli. “Oh, God, I’m not strong enough to dig a grave. That’s all you. I can help carry the body. Maybe.”

“Hush, you,” said Nico, his eyes never leaving his sister’s face.

“André,” said Lettie, resuming that languid pronunciation of his name. “These are my brothers. Nico and Eli.”

André snapped his head toward them, his face twisted in both terror and resignation. Nico and Eli returned his helpless grimace.

Nico jumped as Gigi chortled in his ear, her sticky fingers grasping at his beard.

“Oh, and André,” continued Lettie. “This is Gianna. She’s your daughter.”

Eli made a choking noise, and Nico stumbled backward. If possible, André's face became even more ashen, and his eyes widened into gaunt circles.

The coffee maker beeped, and Lettie spun around, carafe in hand and a cold smile on her face. "Who wants coffee?"

"I think we'll wait in the other room," said Nico, backing into the doorway.

"Wait!" André rasped. "Leave the—leave my—*her*."

Nico looked to Lettie for permission. She put down the carafe and held out her arms for her child. He hesitated until he recognized the look in her eyes not as fear, but sadness. Complete and utter sadness.

He and Eli went to the living room, and Nico flopped onto the couch. His entire body buzzed, and fighting the instinct to go rescue his sister had him clenching the sofa's armrests until his knuckles were white.

Eli was faring no better. He paced the room, grumbling under his breath. It warmed Nico's heart. Eli was a Meyer now, not in name but in spirit, and that's what counted in the end.

His phone buzzed with a text, and he lifted the screen. A slightly blurry photo of an invitation to a ten-year high school reunion appeared, followed by a simple text.

*ARIANA: FUCK MY LIFE*

Nico's heart clenched. He wanted to go downstairs and sort out whatever was happening between Lettie and the exhausted stranger. He wanted to call Ariana and make a plan for how she would handle

her reunion, if she wanted to handle it at all. He wanted to be the hero and sweep in once again.

Eli collapsed on the couch next to him. “I hate this,” he said. “Should we go back in there?”

*Yes, we have to, something could go wrong, something bad could happen—*

“Lettie can handle herself.” He tugged Eli close, pecking him on the temple. “She’ll ask for help if she needs it.” He tapped out a quick text to Ariana.

*NICO: Yikes. Text me if you need anything.*

And that was all he could do. He had made himself available, and if his sisters asked, he would help. He would ride in like a shining knight, rescuing the princesses from their own stories, but they were just that—*their* stories, not his.

He had his own story now, one shared with a man with brown sugar-colored hair, an affinity for sugary drinks, the inability to sit still in the most inappropriate moments, and a heart that completely belonged to Nico.

He couldn’t wait to see what happily ever after would bring.

# Newsletter

Thank you for reading *Mother Road*. Your support and motivation was important throughout this process, and I appreciate you all!

For upcoming book releases, you can sign up for my newsletter [here](#).

Love, Bree

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My husband, Kurt, for understanding when I disappeared with my laptop, listening to all my crazy ideas, putting up with me yelling



obscure book references at random times, and generally being my amazing person;

And, of course, to Mrs. Beth Evans, who put up with my weirdness for two years, both of which we had to read *The Great Gatsby*—which has now led to really corny green light references in a road trip romance;

And finally, to my mother, who pulled us out of school despite the school's protests to take me on road trips where I learned more than I would ever have in class. I know we were two loud kids in the backseat of a station wagon, but we appreciated every moment. In addition, when I told her I had writer's block because I had to write a sex scene she would eventually read, she told me to "write what's in your heart." And here it is.

# Books by Bree Bennett

## **Sparrow Hill Stories**

*Broken Records*

*Mother Road*

# About the Author

Bree Bennett lives in the Midwest with three dogs, two kids, one husband, and a cat named Harry Houdini. She spends her time writing, reading mushy books, obsessing over Broadway musicals, playing the piano loudly, and leaving unfinished knitting projects around the house.