Saying Goodbye to the Boy in the Photo

Summary

The year is 2017. Over the last few years, Bam Margera has spent more time in the limelight due to his alcoholism than his MTV career, and while he is on the road of recovery, he still feels as though his life is going nowhere. On one hand, he has picked up skateboarding again, but on the other, his marriage is falling apart. The death of Ryan Dunn continues to plague him, and he is haunted by loneliness and grief. Everyone close to him doubts his sobriety, and even Bam himself does not know whether he can fight his inner demons or not. He often stares longingly at the tiny, expensive bottles in the minibar.

An old photo turns everything upside down. Bam is reminded of all that he threw away as a young man, and the meaning of the saying ‘you don’t know what you have until it’s gone’ becomes the wicked joke of his existence. Can he, as a thirty-seven-year-old recovering alcoholic, become the man he always hoped to be? Or will alcohol win the final battle?

And perhaps more importantly, will an acquaintance of old play an important role in the final outcome?

Notes

What does one even say? I've been working on this since I heard that HIM was breaking up, and it felt like the end of an era. Like always, I'm writing for a dead fandom, but whatever, I loved writing this. In many ways, it's my way of saying farewell to Vam - and HIM. From a
writer's perspective, this is more of an in-depth character study - and I experimented a bit with the form.

NOTE: Keep an eye out for the dates at the beginning of chapters and the sections within the chapters. Each chapter is broken into two parts, the present and the past.

I hope you enjoy it :) Comments are always appreciated.
It was January and the borough of West Chester was experiencing one of its harshest winters yet. For the urbanites who were used to wearing suits and high-heels all year round, the low temperatures and freezing wind was a challenge far too unpleasant to be dealt with, and for that reason, many schools and businesses kept their doors closed that day. Bam had laughed at how the news reporters had abused the term ‘blizzard’ – and not to mention the ‘dangerous driving conditions’. It was funny to him, but of course, not every American had been to Scandinavia. He had gone to Rovaniemi fifteen years ago, and man, the snow had been waist-deep, but the Finns, sturdy motherfuckers as they were, had been completely unfazed. Nah, people in West Chester had no idea what they were talking about, whining like spoiled brats. Bam, on the other hand, was over the moon about it. The snow was white and plentiful, covering every inch of Castle Bam and the woodlands that surrounded it. And the best part was that the schools were closed, which meant that Sam, his niece, got to spend the day with him.

“I brought my skateboard!” she declared the moment he opened the door to greet her. A pair of thin arms pulled him in for a hug, always excited about spending time with her favorite uncle, and she squealed with delight as he threw her over his shoulder fireman style.

“In case you didn’t notice” – he shut the door and caught a glimpse of Jess leaving the driveway in his blue pickup truck – “it’s snowing.”

“But, uncle Bam,” she said, and he already detected a hint of protest in her voice, “I thought maybe – since you’ve got such a big-ass house, that we could–”

“Oh, hell no!” he said, laughing. “You know what your auntie has to say about the two of us causing havoc inside the house.”

“Bu-ut! She isn’t here.”

Bam put her down and started unbuttoning her winter coat. She narrowed her eyes at him, clearly unimpressed, and said, “I’m eight years old! Don’t baby me.”

“When you’re all grown up, you’ll see what a gentleman your uncle is.”

She rolled her eyes as he pulled off the bright yellow piece of clothing and tossed it onto an unsuspecting chair, something he would probably live to regret as soon as Nikki returned from her appointment. Not that he cared all that much. It was his house and the only rules that mattered were of his own making. The rule he cherished the most was that all the mess he made, someone else would have to clean up. If Nikki refused to do it, his mother, who stopped by at least four times a week, would do it for her.

“… Come o-on,” she pleaded, her smile wide and her enthusiasm infectious. “Come on, uncle Bam. I won’t tell auntie Nikki about it, I promise – and it can be our secret.”

He heaved a sigh, wondering when on earth the task of parenting had been handed to him, or how. At the best of times, he was not very good at it, easily persuaded into committing crimes such as eating ice cream for breakfast, consulting Wikipedia for writing book rapports and playing videogames until 03:00 a.m., and at the worst of times, he was a total kid himself. Today was definitely one of those times. It was perhaps the concept of ‘snow day’ that made him feel nostalgic
about his childhood, or the fact that Sam was an evil genius, but regardless of what or who was at fault, he caved in.

“Alright, alright,” he said, melting like butter under the warmth of her smile. “But if Nikki gets back early, it’s on you. D’you hear me?”

She rolled her eyes again and said, “Do you really think auntie Nikki can blame someone as cute as me, when my partner in crime is someone as ugly as you?”

He ruffled her hair, working very hard not to laugh at the insult.

“Watch it, kiddo,” he said and grabbed the purple skateboard, the one he had given her for her birthday, and inspected it. “Maybe you’ll grow up looking like me. You never know with genetics, after all. I used to be the se-, uh, the handsomest guy in the neighborhood, but then Phil’s side kicked in and-”

She interrupted him by letting out a loud snort, one that sounded suspiciously like him when he thought someone was spewing out nonsense. “That doesn’t fucking count! Only old people live there,” she said and scrunched up her nose. “I would know. They all talk to me like I’m a fucking baby – ‘cause I’m the only kid.”

“Well, only babies say ‘fucking’ in every other sentence.” He arched an eyebrow at her, again working very hard not to crack a smile. “We’ve talked about this.”

A devilish little smirk played on her lips, and she said, “Then you’re the biggest baby of them all, uncle Bam,” and started laughing hysterically. And in all fairness, she was perhaps more right than wrong. He was thirty-seven, but the concept of growing up was still lost on him, and whenever he ran into old friends who tried to act like they knew something, as if never letting their hair down or having fun besides drinking wine and eating fancy crackers with moldy cheese was their ultimate goal in life, he felt like kicking them in the shin. The thought left him with a bad taste in his mouth, and he swiftly ran upstairs to find his skateboard. Well, one of them. His entire collection was lined up in a room designed for storing skateboards, and there were about fifty of them. It occurred to him that he had not been inside that room in ages, and to a former professional skater, that was a rather depressive thought.

15:22 p.m.

At thirty-six, Nikki Margera was an exceptionally good-looking woman, petite and with long, wavy, dark hair, striking emerald-green eyes and voluptuous lips. She had a degree in graphic design, and for many years, she had used her skillset to make a living. When Lady Luck had smiled at her, showering her with success, she and a friend had started their own company. For some time, she had been too preoccupied with work to focus on her personal life, and in the end, she had worn herself out completely. Then Bam had hired her. The attraction had been there from day one, and after the wedding in Reykjavik in 2013, she had sold her share of the company. She was well aware that some might view her as a surrendered housewife, but after their failed attempts at starting a family of their own, and Bam’s illness, returning to work had been impossible. And Castle Bam was more than enough work for one woman, oftentimes demanding the combined efforts of both wife and mother-in-law. Her hands were as full as they were tied.

Castle Bam was a modern rendering of a medieval castle – and the interior was gothic, anno 2003 when Bam’s emo phase had been at its most dramatic. It had also been the show set of ‘Viva La Bam’, but that was before Nikki’s time, and while fans still drove by, hoping to catch a glimpse of
the former MTV star, it happened less frequently than before. In the beginning of their relationship, the fact that fans would approach Bam – and the house – had made her nervous, but once the novelty had worn off, she had stopped caring. Still, she carried this hope within her that he would change his mind about selling the place and buy a more family friendly house – with neighbors’.

She pulled into the driveway and just sat in her car for a moment, taking in the sight of her now snow-covered home. Bam was yet to have taken down the Christmas decorations, and the colorful lights shone brightly, reminding her of long days spent in bed. A strange, almost rueful smile grazed her lips, and she pushed the thought to the back of her mind and went inside.

“… Bam,” she sighed as she noticed Sam’s yellow winter coat draped over the chair in the hallway.

“Wo-o!” she heard the girl shout at the top of her voice. Then she heard the sound of small wheels screeching against the very expensive oaken floors upstairs.

“Bam!” she called out. “Bam, what are you doing? Are you-”

Sam came flying down the stairs on her skateboard, only inches away from crashing into her auntie, and, probably out of surprise, she lost her balance and subsequently collided with the antique china cabinet. The expensive vase on the top shelf that had been an anniversary gift from her mother fell to the floor and shattered, cracking into thousands of millions of small pieces, and the girl, who looked shell-shocked, let out a small whimper and said, “I’m sorry.”

“… Sam,” the brunette said, kneeling next to the poor child. Blood was oozing from her forehead, and she had tears in her eyes. But being her uncle’s niece, she refused to acknowledge any pain, telling herself it was just a ‘sensory illusion’. Whenever she fell off her skateboard, Bam would tell her those exact words.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?”

“Hey – what the hell?” Bam said as he rushed down the stairs, sounding more than a little concerned at the sight of his niece sprawled out on the floor. “Are you al-”

“Uncle-Bam-did-it!” the girl yelled, the sentence delivered as one word, and Bam laughed, now assured that she was quite alright. The wound was small and she seemed more embarrassed than anything else – and afraid that Nikki would tell her parents, of course.

“The vase, Bam,” Nikki said, tearing up at the pitiful sight. “Why do you insist on doing these things? I’ve told you not to-”

“I’ll buy you one just like it,” he promised her before scooping the little girl into his arms. She accepted the embrace and buried her face in the crook of his neck, hating it when the grown-ups in her family argued with one another. It happened often enough at home – her Mom would yell at her Dad, and her Dad would get all quiet. It was, however, a rare occasion for her to witness a disagreement between her uncle and auntie.

“It’s not the same,” she snapped. “And it isn’t just about the vase. She could have ended up at the hospital! What were you thinking, Bam?”

“I was thinking,” he said, running a hand down the girl’s back, “that I wanted to teach Sam how to ollie.”

She shook her head and said, “Just another day in the Margera household, isn’t it,” before tromping up the stairs and slamming the door to their bedroom shut. At this rate, it would not be his bedroom for much longer, the skater thought and let out a sigh.
“Let’s get you cleaned up, then,” he said and carried her to the bathroom. When he put her down on the chair by the bathtub, she stared down at her hands and refused to meet his eyes. He knelt down in front of her with a wet cloth in his hand and cleaned the wound, though it was only superficial and would not even require a Band-Aid. He had watched her break bones without screaming herself hoarse so he doubted she would be pleased if he made a big fuss over a small scratch like that, and he just patted her knee instead and said, “There – good as new.”

Sam said nothing. She felt uncomfortable, shifting under the gaze of her uncle.

“Hey,” he said, placing his right hand on top of hers. “You good?”

She met his eyes briefly and asked, “Is auntie Nikki really mad at you?”

“Don’t worry about her, kiddo. She gets flustered over nothing these days.”

“Why?”

As much as he was tempted to say ‘because she’s a woman and her ovaries are in a twist’, he told her, “She, uh, she’s just got a lot on her plate these days. Living with me sure ain’t easy.”

She nodded. “You should buy her something nice. Roses – or champagne.”

He smiled and said, “That’s a good idea,” aware that she had noticed how Jess would suck up to Kelly by buying her roses and champagne. The kid was frighteningly observant – clever – and when they tried to speak over her head, she would roll her eyes and say, ‘I’m almost nine years old’, as if that would clarify anything. In spite of being alert, she received poor grades and Jess and Kelly were always on her case, criticizing and punishing her, and as if that was not bad enough, Kelly forbade her from wearing ‘boyish’ clothes and hated Bam for ‘encouraging bad behavior’. What she meant was that skateboarding, whittling wood and fishing were activities better suited for boys, not girls. No wonder she always came to his house – or his parents’ house – whenever she ran away from the dictatorship at home.

When Bam got up from the floor, his wallet fell out of his pocket and tumbled to the floor. Coins flew in every direction, clinking loudly as they hit the marble tiles. Sam crawled around on the floor to retrieve them all, and her eyes widened a little as she found a red one under the bathtub. It depicted a triangle and said ‘1 month’.

“… Foreign money?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with good-natured curiosity. “I’ve never seen red coins before.”

He was silent for a moment, choosing his words carefully before he answered, “That’s a sobriety coin. I got it because I laid off the booze for a month. In a few days, I’ll get my forth coin.”

“Oh.” The girl looked unsurprised. “Daddy says I’m not allowed to drink because it makes you stupid and it kills brain cells, and you can never get new brain cells.”

Bam suppressed a snort. If anyone knew what living hard meant, it was his brother, but after Kelly had roped him in and married his sorry ass, he had probably suppressed all memories of his youth. Or maybe he had just killed so many brain cells in his youth, he had lost all memories of a time before Kelly. Honestly, he sometimes wondered if his brother would ever grow back into his testicles, but with a wife like that, it seemed unlikely. Kelly, who was actually fairly pretty, was a Christian tyrant who had no tolerance for anyone who did not fit into her picture perfect world, which was why she had always disliked Bam – with a passion.

“Too much of anything isn’t good,” he offered as an alternative explanation, one that did not involve
being sent to a fiery pit of doom for drinking a can of nearly non-alcoholic beer, or for getting drunk on prom night, or whatever else awaited her. “And too much alcohol is bad because it makes you lose control, and you make piss poor decisions that can haunt you for the rest of your life.”

She scrunched up her nose. “And Grandma says it tastes really bad. I don’t understand why people drink it – they can just drink Mountain Dew or Coca-Cola instead.”

He smiled at her and said, “You’re absolutely right, kiddo.”

Then the doorbell rang. It was April, Bam’s mother, who had been ordered by her eldest son to babysit for the remainder of the day. As Sam left, Nikki descended the stairs. She marched up to him, looking as foreboding as darkening clouds on a humid day, and she stared at him with cold, hard eyes, willing him to speak.

“Look, I’m sorry about the vase-”

“This isn’t about the stupid vase, Bam,” she said, and the hardness in her eyes was replaced by tears. “We’ve got some very simple rules to abide by in this house, don’t you think? I do everything for you; I do everything for Sam – for your family and your friends. I just…” She had to choke back a sob, wishing dearly that he could just understand her. “I-I want you to respect my opinions, Bam. I-I don’t… I don’t think it’s too much to ask for, is it? We’ve already agreed that the house shouldn’t be your playground.” She paused, brushing away tears. “It has to be a sanctuary for you and me both.”

He nodded, though anger swelled in his guts. The meager, “I’m sorry,” that fell from his lips sounded anything but sincere, and Nikki, being a woman, picked up on it.

“You’re just feeding me with lies, Bam,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Hey, don’t be like that. I said I wouldn’t cause havoc while you’re at home, which you weren’t.”

She fixed him with an unimpressed look, one that said ‘You’re being a man-child’, and placed her hand on her hip, demonstrating her anger. “Your niece could’ve been hurt, Bam. Kelly would’ve kept her from seeing you for weeks and you know it.”

“You’re right, Nikki,” he said, his voice a sharp bite. “You’re always right – and I’m always wrong.”

At that, the water dam broke and she started sobbing uncontrollably, her body shaking as though she was in the final throes of hypothermia. Bam immediately felt bad about the caustic, waspish comment, reminding himself that he had promised her to be at his best behavior, that he owned it to her after years of heavy drinking and partying, and he put his arms around her and accepted his defeat, saying over and over that he was a jerk and that he was sorry. Her tears were, however, relentless, and even his sweetest, most heartfelt apologies could not soothe her.

“… I’ll buy you dinner,” he said, desperate for the crying to stop.

“Yeah?” She pulled back and studied his face. “Where?”

He grinned confidently and said, “What about sushi at that place you li-”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, her lips curving into a beautiful smile. “But you don’t like sushi, Bam.”

“They make it with chicken too, remember? I can stomach that stuff.”

Her smile widened into a grin. For a short-lived second, he recognized the young woman he had
proposed to, the young woman who had been fun and free-spirited. Warmth spread across his chest, and he let his hand slide down the slight curve of her back, stopping at her bum. She cupped his cheek and pressed her lips to his. But the kiss was brief and chaste, and as she pulled back, he found that he no longer saw the girl in her, just the tired, hormonal wife who spent her days worrying about the silliest details of their marital life.

“I need to take a shower and get ready,” she said, and while her face was blotched and her eyelids swollen, there was no telling she had just been crying her heart out. This dumbfounded him. Had he just been played?

“Alright. I need to go through a couple of e-mails first anyways. Just let me know when you’re ready.”

Bam kissed her again with robotic ease, and as she walked upstairs to change into one of the pretty dresses she had bought with his money, she hummed happily to herself, pleased. Bam, on the other hand, had a sinking feeling that things were about to spiral out of control. Over the last couple of weeks, his already faltering marriage had taken a turn for the worse. Yes, he had attended every AA meeting – he had even brought coffee and gluten-free cookies – and had seen his shrink every now and then, but nothing could keep them from drifting apart. He wondered about the glue that had held them together – what had it been? Perhaps his alcoholism, and then, as he had sobered up, the miscarriage. Funny how bloodied sheets and a lump of dead flesh could bring two people closer together.

When he had first purchased Castle Bam, he had been adamant that he should have his own study, one where he could do his video editing and other things relevant to his work. He had lost count of all the music videos and movies he had directed and edited over the years, be it his own skate videos or other projects. Not that it mattered anymore. His computers, mixing console and cameras were outdated to the point of being antiquities of the electronical era, and while he had done some editing for laughs and giggles in recent years, the study was mainly used as a home office.

“Too bad,” he said to himself. And it was. He had always thought, ‘I can do it when I have some time off’, and now that he finally had enough leisure to skate, make videos or whatever else struck his fancy, it was as if all creativity had just evaporated.

He sat down at his 1920s mahogany bow-front desk and stared out the window, watching the snowflakes as they sailed through the air like microscopic UFOs. Winter often had a strange effect on him, and as he watched the scenery, the look on his face turned wistful.

His phone rang, causing him to snap out of his daydreams. He looked down at the caller ID and frowned. It said ‘GOD’.

“… Hey, it’s Bam speaking,” he said, sounding oddly polite.

“Ba-am, my dude!” a familiar voice boomed. “How’s Missy doing?”

“Um, Nikki’s doing fine,” Bam corrected him, wondering why he was having this conversation. He had not talked to Joey – a former employer of his – in years. His contract with Element had ended about ten years ago, and back then, it had not been renewed because of another more relevant contract. MTV had put him on the radar of mainstream America, then Europe and the rest of the world, and his career as a comedian slash stuntman slash director had taken off. There was no doubt
in his mind that skateboarding would always be his first love, but at some point, the stunts and TV series had stolen too much of his time. “What about Emma?”

“Ah, I figured! I’ve made an upgrade myself,” the voice said, laughing. “I’ve got a Candice now.”

“Oh, that’s – that’s cool, bro.” Bam arched an eyebrow but decided not to ask. Emma, who he had only met once, was still young, probably in her late twenties or early thirties, and he assumed that Candice was even younger. Joey was, of course, still dealing with the midlife crisis that had led to his first divorce about fifteen years ago, at the age of thirty.

“Oh, yeah,” he said wryly, unabashed to be paying for company. “She’s a looker, alright.”

“So, just to be rude,” the skater said, not really interested in catching up for the sake of catching up, “why the fuck are you calling me?”

“Well, Bam,” the man said, drawing in a sharp breath. “I’ve heard rumors that you’ve sobered up?”

His mouth felt bone dry as he said, “Yeah, dude. Three months sober now.”

“Three months,” the man echoed. “And you’re planning on keeping it that way?”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Well!” The man gave a chuckle. “Bam, my man, how do you feel about getting some work? The moment I heard about your recovery, I thought to myself ‘Damn, it’s about time our viewers get an update from good old Bam Margera’ – and you’d probably like to, I don’t know, give your side of the story?”

Bam frowned. “I never did that kind of work for Element,” he said, sounding confused.

“Your name is a trademark, Bam,” Joey said, which implied that this was to be a marketing campaign – and all the oldies with beer guts who had once watched him on TV would see his ‘recovery’ and feel inspired to buy products with his design. “And naturally, my thought was that we’d sponsor a film on your return to skateboarding. I’m assuming you’re a bit rusty by now, but you’ll get a hang of it soon enough, eh? It’d be just like the good old days, Bam!”

“Oh, wow,” he said quietly, somewhat overwhelmed. “Can I give it some thought?”

“Sure,” Joey said, his voice still cheery. “Just don’t think on it too long or you’ll be spooked, he-he! I was thinking you could go to Spain for a couple of months – and without the crew. It should be upfront and personal – and I don’t think-”

“I agree.”

“Oh, good.” The man sounded slightly bemused, as if he had expected an argument. “Well, Bam, think on it for a few days, or a week, maybe? Just know I would love to work with you again.”

“Talk to you real soon, Joey,” he promised. “Take care.”


Bam just sat there with his iPhone cradled against his ear for a good ten minutes, and as he sat there, staring blankly ahead, a small furrow appeared between his brows. The idea of going to Spain for a few months, to leave West Chester and all its predictabilities behind, was intriguing. He almost surprised himself by feeling so inclined to leave. He was thirty-seven now and had barely even left
his hometown, the place he had been born and raised, on his own. For as long as he could remember, the thought of doing something without friends or family – without a chaperone, basically – had appalled him, but now? Something had changed.

A portrait of a man with natural red hair and a beard stared down at him from the wall, his pale blue eyes challenging him to seize the opportunity.

“You’ve got no right,” he barked, annoyed, and then silence enveloped him. That pressing silence had been part of his life for too long, he decided. And maybe going abroad would help him figure out what to do next? Such as it was, his life had come to a standstill; or rather, it seemed to him that time itself had come to a standstill. Again, he glanced up at the portrait and thought he heard it say, ‘I’ve got every right, fucktard’, and he had to chuckle at the thought, if only to keep the tears at bay.

“I miss you too, asshole,” he whispered to himself, and then he realized he was in fact talking to himself and groaned, burying his face in his hands. How he wished he could have just called him! But no, he had to go ahead and die! Bam felt enraged all of a sudden. Here he was, six years down the line, and he was talking about going to Spain to reinvent himself – without Ryan. Slowly, he rose to his feet and proceeded to take the picture off the wall. He placed it face down on his desk, not bearing to look at it, but what use was it? Ryan would never leave his mind, after all. And even if the memories were beautiful, they all came with sharp teeth that nipped at his heart. He could revisit the lazy days of their childhood, the wild and untamed days of their youth, their MTV days – but there would never be anything beyond that.

Bam left the room, hurried down the hallway and into the living room to try and relax. He reclined on the sofa and pressed his fingertips against his shut eyes, like he was afraid that they might roll out of their sockets – and it sure felt like it. When some time had passed, he managed to calm down and started daydreaming about a picturesque village in Spain. No Ryan to accompany him, alright, that was how it had been for six years already, and he could cope. He was about to doze off when his eyes suddenly shot open.

“Fuck,” he mumbled. “Where the fuck…”

He got up from the armchair and began going through his pockets in a frenzied search. When he realized that his pockets were empty, a look of terror transformed his face. He panicked and hurried to the laundry room, where he turned the hamper upside down and started going through the dirty, smelly clothes. Where was that goddamn hoodie? He searched and searched, but to no avail. Eventually, he gave up, letting out a quiet, “ Fucking hell,” but as he turned around to leave, his eyes landed on the drying rack. There was the red hoodie he had worn the day before, wet and dripping. As realization dawned on him, Bam’s every muscle went rigid. This, he decided, was very bad.

“… Shit, shit, shit,” he whispered under his breath, his heart suddenly beating too fast. He rushed over to the drying rack, grabbed the hoodie and went through the pocket. What had once been dollar bills had been reduced to lumps of green, soggy paper, and the photo, well, the photo was badly water damaged as well.

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“Fucking hell,” he muttered and sank to the floor, his legs suddenly boneless. How the fuck had he managed to forget about the photo? The previous day, he had gone for a ride on his ATV and had decided to be smart and take the cash and the photo out of his wallet beforehand, and because he was a fucking moron, he had put it in the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie. The money was unimportant – he had enough cash to live about ten more lives – but the photo? Laughter bubbled up out of his throat; laughter gushed out of him like water out of a fountain, and as he laughed, something inside him seemed to click into the wrong place, and he grinned and shook his head and laughed like the Mad Hatter himself. Not until Nikki appeared in the doorway, clad in a sexy red dress with a very
confused expression on her face, did his manic laughter fade.

“… Are you alright?”

Bam smiled sadly, his hands full of mushy paper, and said, “Sorry, babe, I’ll have to take a rain check.”

09.43 a.m. 17.05.2000

“What a long fucking flight,” Bam complained for the umpteenth time that hour. They were on their way to Finland for a skate contest, and the travel time was long, approximately fourteen hours if one included the two-hour layover in Frankfurt. It felt like nothing short of a small eternity, and Bam, being full of energy and incapable of quietude that did not involve naptime, looked as though he was being exposed to medieval torture. Ryan rolled his eyes at him, seeing as he was more than a little fed up with the endless stream of whining that fell from his best friend’s lips.

“I can’t really do anything about that, can I?”

The dark-haired man gave him a look of despair. “You can entertain me?” he nearly begged. “This is taking forever!”

“Well, it’s just as long for me, dude,” he muttered dryly, not exactly overjoyed by the fact that Bam had the patience of a four-year-old on speed. “Here, read this,” he said and shoved a magazine from the seat pocket into the younger man’s hands. Bam frowned. “Or stare out the window, or go talk to that kid in the back – I don’t even fucking care - just please, let me sleep.”

Bam grunted and slapped the ginger across the face with the rolled up magazine, though it did not startle or annoy him the least bit. Bam had done a lot worse over the years, like setting his hair on fire. “Like you can sleep with all the noise!”

Ryan gave him a long and berating look. “Read the magazine, Bam, for fuck’s sake.”

The younger one held his hands up in surrender. “Fine, fine. Whatever, dude.”

He had hoped Ryan would somehow respond to that, or take pity on him, but he was already snoring. Bam still held the rolled up magazine in one hand and looked at it with a deep frown attached to his face, not sure whether doing nothing would be more enriching than reading. He sighed and eventually started skimming through the pages, glad that it was written in English and not in Finnish. There were articles about Finnish food, the indigenous people of Scandinavia, the Northern Lights and so on. Bam yawned into his hand as he read about things he had no intention of ever trying out or seeing for himself. And then, on the very last page, he found a small article about a band called HIM.

“… What the…” he mused quietly to himself and furrowed his brows in surprise. The singer – Ville Valo – was strikingly feminine; however, the band was called His Infernal Majesty, which led him to think that they played heavier music, perhaps even metal. He read the article over and over again, and while he could not quite explain why, his eyes kept wandering back to the vocalist depicted on the page. His skin was incredibly pale, and he had wavy, dark hair that nearly touched his shoulders. Pink and pouty lips were slightly parted in a way that reminded him of old pictures of Marilyn Monroe, though his expression seemed more mischievous, his green eyes sparkling dangerously.

The intercom chirped, causing Bam to jump ten feet up into the air, and then a gruff voice with a thick accent started speaking: “Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. As we start our
descent, please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright position. Make sure your seat belt is securely fastened and all carry-on luggage is stowed underneath the seat in front of you or in the overhead bins. Thank you.”

Bam felt relieved upon hearing this, sick of spending so many hours of his life stuck inside an airplane. His butt cheeks were hurting, his ears were clogged, and he honestly could not wait to get off the airplane to stretch his legs and breathe that fresh Finnish air he had read so much about in that damn magazine. But before he shook his best friend awake, he tore out the article with the peculiar band and stuffed it in the front pocket of his hoodie.

As he looked at his sleeping friend, a sly smirk crept onto his face. He pressed two fingers over Ryan’s nose and clasped the other hand over his mouth, effectively blocking his airways. The older man’s eyes snapped open, completely taken by surprise, but as soon as he noticed Bam’s beaming, excited face, he calmed down and swatted his hands away.

“… Bam,” Ryan grumbled and gave him a murderous look.

“What?” the grinning twenty-year-old asked innocently. “We’re landing.”

Ryan frowned. “How long was I out?”

Bam lifted his shoulder in a half shrug. “I dunno. An hour? Something like that.”

“You managed to sit still for an hour?”

Bam gave a chuckle at that. “Well, turns out that magazine wasn’t half bad after all.”

12:32 p.m.

The hotel room was decent, at least in comparison to many of the motels they had stayed at during previous skate contests back in the US. They had a small television, a kettle, and a minibar full of beer and tasty snacks, and what was even better was the bathroom; there was no mold or bad odors, and everything was clean and tidy. That is to say, everything had been clean and tidy. Then Bam had happened.

“… How the fuck did you manage that?” Ryan asked the second he stepped out of the bathroom. He had put on one of those oversized hotel robes and had a towel turban on his head.

“What?”

“The room,” he clarified, though it hardly acquired clarification. “It looks like a fucking battlefield.”

“Oh, that,” Bam mumbled with his eyes glued to the television. Everything was in Finnish, so he did not understand much of what was being said, but seeing as it was a music channel, Bam decided that it was not crucial to understand everything. He had figured out that there would be a music video countdown of some sort, and he was smiling from one ear to the other. A bottle of Lapin Kulta rested in his hand, which seemed like Manna from heaven to a twenty-year-old American. “Guess I thought I had forgotten something… but then I found it.”

“I see,” Ryan said, and then he chuckled. It explained why the suitcase had been turned inside out. April, Bam’s mother, had undoubtedly washed Bam’s clothes and folded them neatly in the suitcase, and now all the clothes were scattered about on the floor. Ryan shook his head and grabbed a beer from the minibar.
“And what are we watching?”

“A music video countdown,” Bam informed him; then the countdown began, and the first video started playing. The description in the corner said: “HIM, Join Me in Death”.

Bam’s jaw dropped.

“That’s him! That’s that dude!” he exclaimed, causing Ryan to raise an eyebrow.

“Who? The faggot?”

Bam gave him a stern look that made Ryan laugh. “What the hell, Bam?”

The younger man offered no explanation. Instead, he continued to watch the video in complete disregard of Ryan’s teasing. His face was transformed by awe, and he even forgot about his beer. Ryan shifted his attention back and forth between Bam and the band. They continued to sing, “Join me in death,” over and over, and Ryan thought it sounded like some occult mantra. He was completely baffled by Bam’s apparent interest in the goth rock group, but he chose not to make any further remarks.

Once the video ended, Bam snapped out of it and returned to the present once again.

“Woah,” he said to himself and got out of bed. “Holy shit. Did you see that? That was so fucking awesome!”

“… Um, I guess,” Ryan responded, and he was trying his best not to laugh at Bam’s enthusiasm, though he found it increasingly difficult. “They’re not really… well, not what I’d expect from you?”

Bam shrugged. “I like lots of different music. But this… this isn’t just that. This is… some seriously artsy stuff.”

The older man nodded slowly, not entirely convinced. “They’re kind of gay,” he pointed out with a laugh, thinking Bam would find this amusing. However, he did not find it the least bit amusing and gave Ryan a long, hard look.

“Gay?” he echoed and cocked his head, a little irked by Ryan’s comment.

“Yeah… just… the singer,” Ryan said awkwardly while scratching his neck. “With the makeup and all… and the clothes. Not very… evil.”

Bam rolled his eyes. “Well, everyone can’t be Dani Filth or Marilyn Manson.” He put on an old, worn denim jacket and a pair of pale blue sneakers. Ryan stared at him with a confused frown on his face, and Bam shrugged and said, “I like them, so just back off, okay? I’m gonna head down to that record shop by the pub.”

“Okay. Cool,” Ryan said in a cheery tone of voice. “They’re not bad, Bam. It’s just different is all.”

The dark-haired man ran a hand through his messy curls and smiled that trademark smile of his. “It’s all good, man,” he said. “Catch you later, Dunn.”

Then he disappeared out the door and left Ryan to himself. Being alone, he got dressed and changed the channel to some British show with Finnish subtitles. As he flopped down into the only armchair in the room, the same armchair Bam had been seated in before he had left, he realized that something else was occupying the chair. He lifted his butt high and pulled whatever it was from underneath him, and then he realized it was Bam’s smelly hoodie. He threw it on the floor where the rest of
Bam’s clothes were scattered about, but he quickly noticed that something had fallen out from the pocket in the process. As he picked it up, he saw that it was a torn and wrinkled piece of glossy paper. It depicted that same man from the television.

13:36 p.m.

Bam returned to the hotel room with a CD – Razorblade Romance – and another one of those extremely eccentric smiles on his lips. As he shoved the disc into the CD player, his blue eyes sparkled with the happiness of a kindergartner. He then kicked his shoes off and collapsed on the bed, bouncing slightly on the springs. The music blared out of the speakers. Bam leaned forward, his childish face alight as he declared euphorically, “This is the shit.”

“Bam-”

“Dude, are you even listening?” the twenty-year-old interrupted him. The broad grin on his face would not budge, and Ryan, still seated in the armchair, had a worried look on his face, his forehead crinkled up in thought as he regarded the younger man.

“Bam,” Ryan said, and then he cleared his throat nervously. The skater did not notice, however, for he was far too distracted by the music to pay attention to his friend. While Bam listened to the songs, Ryan picked up the empty CD cover and wrinkled his nose in distaste. It was pink. The very androgynous man he had now seen a total of three times showed off his bare stomach. He had a cigarette dangling out from in between his lips and wore a huge fur coat. The picture was in itself very suggestive and homoerotic, at least to Ryan it was, and he could not say that he approved.

“… Is this a new obsession or what?” he asked quietly, concerned for his best friend’s well-being. Bam had a habit of turning interests into obsessions.

“I want to listen to the album, Dunn,” Bam said and closed his eyes, tuning out.

“… Okay.”

Ryan nodded in spite of the fact that Bam was blind to it, mainly because he knew that the younger man was too distracted by the whiskey-soaked voice to care about his opinion. For about forty-five minutes, they sat there without speaking, listening to the album until the last song had been sung. When Bam wanted to play the album for a second time, Ryan ran out of patience. Rather than stay and listen, he went downstairs to the hotel bar. He really could use an ice-cold cold beer to compensate for the forty-five minutes of earache, not to mention the thunderous headache that was making itself known, now spreading from his temples to his forehead. Perhaps a strong Porter would do the trick.
The silence stretched out between them for several seconds. Bam sat on the floor with what had been dollar bills in his hands, his eyes drawn to the wall. Nikki did not even have to rely on her intuition to tell that something was off about the scenario – and it had nothing to do with the money. Bam had a habit of throwing money at people, either to shut them up or to make them smile, and the three dollar bills that had gone on a fatal expedition through the washing machine were insignificant. There was, however, something strange about his face; the grave expression it held was a stark contrast to the Bam she knew. Even when life had been grimmer than a German fairytale had he been brave enough to laugh it off.

“Bam.” She had not realized she was holding her breath. “Bam, are you alright?”

“… Yeah, yeah,” Bam said without looking at her, his eyes still glued to the wall. Inside his head, he was gazing inwards, or backwards, and it was as if the antidepressants had just stopped working in a heartbeat. ‘Being stuck in the past is unproductive,’ his shrink had told him, and he had been handed some life pills. But now his head was a hole again.

“… never listen to me,” he heard Nikki say, and he knew he had zoned out, missing most of her complaints.

“Uh, yeah, sorry…” He briefly wondered whether he should tell her that the medication was suddenly useless, but he decided to spare her the details. “I’ve changed my mind about going out.”

“Bam, what the heck is going on?” Nikki asked, her voice now stiff with hurt and betrayal. “You can’t just-”

“I know I ‘can’t just’,” he said, finally lifting his gaze. When he saw the tears in her eyes, his expression went from grave to desperate, and he whispered, “I’m sorry, Nikki, I really am. I’m just-,” he stopped himself mid-sentence, shaking his head. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, Nikki. I’m not feeling too great, alright?”

That quieted her, and all remnants of aggression melted away and was replaced by affection.

“Oh, honey, it’s fine,” she whispered in an uneven voice. Her thoughts went to the miscarriage. He had pushed his own grief aside for weeks and had focused solely on her recovery, and maybe, now that Sam had visited for the first time since Christmas, he finally felt the impact of their loss. “I’m sorry, Bammie. I-I should’ve considered…”

He furrowed his brow. Bammie – had she forgotten how he despised being called by that name?

“Considered what?”
“… Bam,” she said, her eyes shining with wetness. “The baby.”

The way she delivered that word, so bluntly and so devoid of emotion, as if her heart had been dug out of her chest and buried next to their son, was like getting a bucket of ice water over his head. He took in a deep breath, willing away the mental images that popped up, images of bloodstained sheets. And the small ‘funeral’ a couple of days later, the one that had dragged him back in time. If he had ever needed Ryan, it had been then, but Ryan was dead too. Ryan had been cold in the ground for six years; their child but weeks. And he would never get to know the little boy, the little boy he had tentatively started calling ‘Ryan’ inside his head, because truly, living in a world without a Ryan in it was terribly empty. Instead, both of them had succumbed, and it was suddenly twice as empty to be alive.

She sat down next to him on the floor and put her arm around him, offering him comfort, and Bam, like a lost child, snuggled his head into her shoulder, accepting it. She smiled in that sad, disappointed manner she sometimes did, a smile she wore like a piece of armor, and she let out a small sigh before saying, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he muttered back, and while she could not be certain, she thought she felt the wetness of his tears through the thin fabric of her dress. Her motherly instincts kicked in as she started rubbing his arm, whispering the kindest words she could think of, and for about fifteen minutes, they just sat there, cuddling up to one another.

Nikki eventually went to bed, exhausted, and Bam, equally exhausted, went to the bathroom where he started rummaging through the drawers. In the end, he stood by the sink with Nikki’s pink hair dryer in one hand and the picture of Ville in the other. His efforts were in vain, of course. Ville now lacked half his face and was short of his left arm and shoulder. For a moment there, he hated his wife – hated her for having washed his hoodie without having gone through the pocket first, but that was silly. Nikki had not put the photo in his pocket, he had, and that was probably the daftest thing he had done in a while.

He put the hair dryer and the photo down by the sink and flinched as he saw his reflection in the mirror.

“… Shit,” he breathed and ran a hand through his dark, messy curls. Some gray was beginning to show. Nikki said it looked good on him, but then again, she was probably pleased as long as he kept the pounds off. In addition, he knew she had a thing for older men. The fact that he was now considered ‘an older man’ or a ‘silver fox’ creeped him out. Bam considered the gray as a sign of inevitable death; there was nothing sexy about it. As a young man – without silver threads in his hair – he had never offered the concept of death much thought. Life had been easy back then, and the future, beyond the next two weeks, had never once been on his mind. Now that he was older, he knew he had spent half his life, and on what? He had not spent half his life; he had wasted it.

For a sweet, drugging moment, Bam closed his eyes and remembered that first trip to Finland. He remembered the Scandinavian summer nights that had refused to grow dark. When midnight had come around, the air had become cold and crisp, and the flowers had curled up for the night, making their bed. He smiled as he remembered the cheap vodka and the way it had burned their throats. They had been poor, sure, but they had hungered for life, unaware that the rules of death applied to them as much as the next person. That summer, they had been invincible – and completely unaware that such a summer would never repeat itself.

The summer that followed had been different. His career had started to take off in the US, and Bam had been high on himself and the money that came in on his bank account once a month. Those had been the days. And in the middle of the wonderful chaos that had been his life, he had decided to go
to England to skate and get some cool footage for one of his videos. As always back then, he had been lucky; HIM were on tour and had a gig set up in London. Bam had been over the moon about his good fortune, and for the first time ever, he had attended a HIM concert. It had turned out to be one of those life-altering moments, something he had not realized until much later. He had been a lot of things back then, but self-aware? Not in the slightest.

23:19 p.m. 22.07.2001

“That’s got to be it,” Ryan said and nodded in direction of a red door. The younger man shot him a questioning look, which caused Ryan to sigh. “See the huge guy next to the door?”

“Oh,” Bam said dumbly and studied the bloke. He was tall, muscular, and definitely not someone you would pick a fight with. He had to be the bodyguard.

“You’ve got your MTV card, right?”

“Yeah,” Bam said and spilled a nervous laugh. Ryan could see gooseflesh on his arms. He raised an eyebrow at the observation; he had, after all, never seen gooseflesh on Bam before. Bam was many things, but he was never anxious or scared of making a fool of himself. On the contrary, he loved to make other people laugh by doing stupid stunts. However, this was a different and unfamiliar setting, one that challenged Bam’s one great weakness – his kryptonite – the band and its mastermind. It was the soft spot that made Bam’s limbs and heart turn into gooey mash.

“Shit, man,” the skater breathed. “I can’t just… What if they tell me to get lost?”

Ryan placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it gently. “You’ve got this. You’re Bam Margera. You can do whatever the fuck you want, remember?”

The younger one tried to smile in spite of himself. In the end, it looked more like a nervous twitch than a smile, and Ryan had to conceal a laugh by coughing awkwardly into his hand.

“Don’t be a wuss – you’re acting like you’ve suddenly grown a vagina.”

The younger man looked appalled and declared, “Alright, that’s it. I’m going in!”

Bam straightened his back and walked leisurely and yet confidently toward the mountain of a man who guarded the door. He held his expensive camera in one hand, the one he used to shoot his skate videos, and his MTV employee ID card in the other hand. The guy had noticed him by now and eyed him suspiciously, most likely due to the oversized grin on his face. He probably looked like a drunk kindergartener with an expensive camera. For that exact reason, the mountain man blocked the door and said, “You’re not getting in, lad,” in a tone that would have sent most grannies flying over the hedge.

Undeterred by the man’s hostility, Bam smiled even wider. “I’m with MTV,” he said confidently and held the laminated card up under the broad man’s nose. “I’ve got an interview with the guys. Best not to let ‘em wait, you know.”

The bodyguard studied his employee ID card and gave a low grunt of disbelief, but to Bam’s astonishment, he opened the door and said, “Alright, then.” Bam, who had not actually thought that the guy would let him pass through the gilded gates, struggled not to squeal with excitement. Instead, he gave him a brief, “Thank you,” and went on his merry way, but the moment he walked through that door, all he could hear was the pounding of his own heart and the blood rushing through his veins. His palms were sweaty, and his breath hitched as he took in the sight of the familiar faces
before him. All eyes were on him.

“… Hi!” he said and waved with his ID card while smiling like the mad hatter himself. “I’m Bam Margera, I’m from the US, and, uh, I kind of flew all the way here to see you guys perform. Really great show!”

The four musicians looked completely baffled, and there was a dead silence in the room. Bam stood there awkwardly with his camera and ID card, but he then attached the ID card to the front of his hoodie and walked over to the fridge. There he nonchalantly grabbed a beer, as though he had a right to, and when he turned around, the guys were still staring at him like he had fallen down through the ceiling. As he studied their faces, he felt a little disheartened upon realizing that one was missing from the group.

“… Nice to meet you, Bam,” the guy with the dreads – Linde – said and smiled a welcoming smile. “First American fan I’ve met so far.”

“How on earth did you discover our music?” Mige asked with a somewhat dumbfounded look on his face. He was obviously intrigued by this person – this fan – who had casually walked into their dressing room with such confidence. With his floppy haircut and loose-fitting clothes, Mige deduced that he had to be in his early twenties – quite possibly a skateboarder – and he was humored by the fact that he liked their music. He would have guessed that Eminem was more up his alley.

Bam flashed his pearly whites, well aware that he was the center of attention. He swigged at his beer and hoped it would soothe his nerves, and he was nervous indeed. It confused him in some way; he was normally full of confidence, bold as brass and ready to face any challenge without losing his head. But be that as it may, Bam still felt as though his heart was lodged in his throat.

“Oh, I went to Finland for a skate contest last year,” he said, and he knew he came across as confident. “You guys were pretty much everywhere – on posters, on TV – just about freaking everywhere! So, I couldn’t not listen to your music.”

“That’s cool,” Mige, the bassist, commented. “D’you have a favorite song, Bam?”

“… Uh…”

Bam’s eyes still darted around the room; he was still disappointed that one person was absent.

“He went to the bathroom,” Linde said with a soft smile, and the skater went red with embarrassment. The four men started cracking up, amused that Bam had lost his groove. “He’s the frontman, I get it,” the blonde added with a laugh. “We’re just stage props.”

“Nah, man,” the skater said dismissively and took another sip of beer, still slightly flustered by Linde’s previous comment. “Takes more than one man to be a band – I’d know ‘cause my brother’s in a band, and he’s…”

Bam paused and shuddered. He could swear that someone was staring at him.

“Hello?” a rich and dark voice said. Bam’s heart skipped a beat, and he quickly turned around and locked eyes with the man in question – Ville Valo – and had to stifle a surprised yelp. The chiseled face was wreathed by locks of umber that made his skin seem deathly pale, and the green of his eyes was even more radiant as he stood before him in the flesh, playful and young as they were. Bam felt the blood being drained from his face, and his mouth fell open in a dumb expression.

“I-I’m Bam Margera,” he stammered, and the beautiful man smiled a sincere smile that made Bam’s blood boil and freeze at the same time. His hands were trembling, his stomach was all in knots, and
he was sweating. He could feel his pulse pounding like a bass drum in his ears, and dizziness washed over him in waves. He dearly hoped that Ville could not hear the sound of his heartbeat. However, Bam was overcome with anxiousness. His face mirrored the feeling to perfection, and the fact was painfully obvious to every man present.

“You’re American?” Ville asked, to which Bam nodded eagerly. Then Ville’s eyes landed on the MTV employee ID card. “And you’re working for MTV?”

Bam felt a little ashamed upon being asked that question, mainly due to the hopeful tone of Ville’s voice. While he did in fact work for MTV, it had nothing to do with the musical aspect of the channel. He was working on a project called Jackass, but he heavily doubted that the Finns had even heard of the show before. Either way, he was not there on a job assignment and had therefore lied. He felt like a five-year-old getting caught red-handed while stealing cookies out of the cookie jar.

“Yeah, but… I really just used the card to get in.” He laughed nervously. Ville’s eyes darkened at the confession, and Bam bit his lower lip while inwardly cursing himself. “Uh, Sorry,” he mumbled and averted his eyes, shifting his gaze to his feet in an attempt to avoid the singer’s disappointed stare. He then said, “I didn’t mean to get your hopes up, man.”

Ville shrugged like he could not have cared less. “Oh, no worries,” he reassured the young American and put a hand on his shoulder. “They will come chasing after us. Eventually.”

As soon as he said that, their eyes locked. A beautiful smile blossomed on his pink lips, a smile that was meant for Bam and for Bam alone. The skater melted and felt his throat go dry. His heart went berserk, threatening to explode, and his palms became sweaty. The Finn’s eyes gleamed as he watched the younger man’s reaction; he was intelligent enough to understand the weight of his presence. It had turned the young American into a jittery nervous wreck, and while it amused him greatly, he managed to refrain from laughing and smiled politely instead.

“Gimme a beer, would you?” Ville then asked, and Bam nodded frantically and handed him a beer from the fridge. He opened his mouth and was about to add something to the conversation, but he found himself unable to voice his thoughts. For the first time in his life, he found it hard to speak. The words were simply lodged in his throat.

“Now, come sit with us,” the green-eyed man offered. “You can probably put the camera down too, now that you’re here,” he said teasingly, referring to Bam’s little scam. The skater blushed and did not hesitate to put it down on the coffee table, feeling somewhat foolish for having gone to such lengths to meet the band. But honest or not, the little lie had worked like a charm.

As soon as Bam sat down, the guys began chatting away in Finnish. Bam felt uncomfortable about this as he obviously did not speak the language. The vocalist once again took pity on him, and he scooted over to where Bam was seated on the rather worn-out couch. Green eyes sparkled with curiosity and boldness as he regarded the American. He wetted his lips with his tongue and then smiled another silky smile, the one that made Bam melt into a puddle.

“So, what kind of work do you do for MTV, Bam?”

Bam’s whole face lit up at the inquiry, or perhaps it was due to the fact that Ville had remembered his name, but either way, Ville had sparked his interest.

“Oh, I do stunts,” he said and grinned from one ear to the other. “We’re a team actually. It’s me, Johnny, Dunn…” he trailed off and then laughed. It hit him that Ville had no idea who any of them were. Outside the US, no one knew their names yet, though there was no doubt in Bam’s mind that it would change in the future. Their names would be on everybody’s lips soon enough.
“… So, you’re a stuntman?” Ville asked. His expression turned into a frown. “You make movies?”

“No-no! Not like that.” Bam laughed. “We’re called Jackass, and, well, we basically do stupid stunts for laughs! It’s always a blast. I’m also a professional skateboarder, so I try my best to include some skate tricks and good shit like that.”

The Finn started laughing too. Bam noticed that Ville had a sort of inward laughter that sounded odd coming from someone like him. He had honestly expected for someone with such a deep voice to have a menacing laughter, but Ville was everything but menacing. He was utterly mesmerizing.

“What stunts?”

“Everything that hurts, pretty much,” Bam said. “Like kicking each other in the nuts, or riding donkeys…”

“Ouch!” Ville said and scrunched up his nose. “You sound like some adrenaline junkie,” he then pointed out humorously, and Bam shrugged.

“I guess you could call me that.”

“And what did you think of the show, Bam?”

“T’was great!” Bam beamed. “Gotta dig your voice, man.”

The singer smiled again. “Thank you. You have no idea how much it pleases me to know we have some American fans too…”

The conversation became gradually more fluent and natural after that. They had gotten drunk together and stayed out the entire night. Ryan had even joined them at some point, and he had gotten a bit tipsy and spoken to the guys like he had known them forever. Bam had gotten the same feeling, and especially where Ville was concerned.

A few stray rays of sunlight filtered through the gauze curtains. One landed on Bam’s face, which made him groan and grumble something incoherent, annoyed by the rude awakening. As he opened his eyes and took in the unfamiliar surroundings of the hotel room, he first assumed that he had spent his night with some girl from the bar. He pulled the duvet down by an inch and let out a stunned gasp. Next to him in bed lay none other than Ville Valo himself. He was snoring with his lips slightly parted, most likely a result of the massive amounts of vodka he had consumed. The skater had to stifle a laugh as the memories came back to him; they really had taken the streets by storm.

Bam looked around the room again. It was tidy apart from empty beer bottles from the minibar and Bam’s shirt on the floor. He saw that the Finn had removed his shirt too, revealing more of that unblemished, white skin that resembled fresh snow. Then there were the tattoos. He gawked at the embellished ‘S’ that encircled his nipple – it could have been easily mistaken for a ‘g’ – and the full sleeve tattoo that depicted acanthus leaves. Enthralled, he watched his bare chest as it rose and fell like the soft waves of the ocean. The sound of him snoring was perhaps more like a sick moose on LSD than that of running water, but he was stunning either way.

Bam frowned. Had he only just thought that thought? He wanted to laugh at himself. Man, what a sentimental idiot he was! But who in their right mind would not have freaked out had they been in his position? Waking up next to your idol – in his hotel room – was just incomprehensible. As he
kept staring at Ville’s sleeping form, he raked his fingers through his messy, dark curls, wondering what would happen next. Did Ville remember all that had happened yesterday? His breath stalled. What if he got angry? Not everyone enjoys waking up to find a stranger in their sheets.

“… Shit,” he whispered to himself. “Shit, shit, shit…”

Another question came to mind: Should he, now that he had sobered up, leave the hotel and Ville behind? He threw another cautious glance at the singer and drew his lower lip between his teeth, for he hated the mere idea of closing that door. However, staying while Ville slept was not an option, and he most certainly would not rouse him. On top of it all, he had a job to do; he had to make a skate video with Ryan.

Once he had reached a conclusion, he snapped out of it. Just as he was about to leave, his gaze landed on Finn for the umpteenth time that morning, and he forgot to move. He had stopped snoring and his lips were pressed together. The long, unruly locks of brown wreathed his head like a dark halo, and now that he was not snoring, he looked rather angelic. Well, angelic in the luciferesque sense of the word. Then Ville let out a low, ‘Mm’, that made Bam’s train of thought crash into a wall and dissolve into panic. He held his breath and watched Ville as he stirred, terrified that he would be shocked to find a stranger in his bed.

"… Mm, anna lasi vettä…” the Finn requested, and his morning voice sounded rough, like it was still warming up. At this, Bam’s heart rate kicked up a notch. Did he assume he was in bed with a friend – possibly even his girlfriend?

“Um…” Bam whispered, unsure of what to say. “Willa?”

A small crease appeared between the singer’s eyebrows, and for a moment, he looked as though he could not quite place the American voice. Then his eyes fluttered opened, revealing the emerald green of his irises. He fixed on him through a lazy squint, and Bam, who felt like all air had been squeezed from his lungs, just sat there, dumbfounded, and waited for the sleepy man to say something.

“… Uh, Bam?” he asked with a frown on his face, almost like he was struggling to remember yesterday and this bug-eyed American kid who now sat on his bed. “You good?”

“… Yeah,” he breathed. “Of course.” Then his whole face lit up. Ville had, after all, remembered his name. “Are you though? You had so much vodka yesterday, and you’re even skinnier than I am!”

Ville laughed softly at his enthusiasm and said, “I’m a head taller than you – and not nearly as fit.”

“True.” A smile broke through his lips. “So, you haven’t got a hangover?”

The singer squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. “A little,” he then admitted, and his catlike eyes blinking open again. “But nothing major – nothing a Finn can’t handle.” He chuckled at his own joke, and after his trip to Finland last year, the skater could hardly disagree.

“What about you, little American?”

Bam had to smile at the gentle teasing. “Uh, yeah, not really. I usually drink, like, lots and lots of alcohol, so…”

Ville smiled. “You didn’t have vodka though. And don’t give me that look, I remember everything.” He then laughed. “You look a little confused, Bam.”

The twenty-one-year-old nodded. “Yeah. I didn’t… I didn’t really anticipate this.” He gestured
meaningfully with his hands at the room, and then he let out a low chuckle. “You’re… uh, yeah,” he said and nearly gave up on speaking altogether. “I’ve been completely obsessed with – uh, with your music, so this is kind of weird.”

“I can imagine,” the Finn sympathized, and as he said this, something playful twinkled in his eyes, something Bam could not quite put his finger on. “Could you fetch me that glass of water, darling?”

Wait, what? Did Ville Valo just call him ‘darling’? His breath audibly hitched in his throat, something he concealed by coughing twice into his fist. Glancing back at Ville, whose smirk could only be described as devilish, he could tell his little performance had been quite unconvincing.

“… Uh, yeah, of course, Willa,” he said, which drew another hearty laugh from the vocalist.

“It’s Ville.”

“Yeah, Willa?”

The Finn pursed his lips together in a faint smile and nodded.

“… Yes, you nailed it.”

Bam had the very definite feeling that he had not ‘nailed it’, but the taller man did not seem to mind the mispronunciation. If anything, he seemed to rather enjoy it. He also seemed pleasantly humored by Bam’s presence, and he was thankful someone else was there to fetch him a bottle of water. At 11 a.m., the distance from the bed to the minibar seemed monstrous, but after all the beer he had consumed only hours before, his mouth and throat felt like sandpaper.

“Here,” Bam said and handed him a bottle. He had brought one for himself too, seeing as he felt his own head pounding – and spinning.

“Kiitos, Bam,” the frontman said, and Bam assumed it meant ‘thank you’. He watched the pale, thin man as he drank the whole bottle in less than thirty seconds, obviously dehydrated.

“Look, I’m sorry if I sound a little rude, but I need to get going,” Bam said hesitantly as he fidgeted with his wristwatch. “We’re shooting some skate videos today… oh, oh…” Terror suddenly transformed Bam’s face, his eyes round as marbles and his mouth agape. “Did I leave the fucking camera at some bar or something? Oh, holy fucking shit-”

“Now, there’s no need for that kind of language, Mr. Margera,” Ville interrupted him with a stern expression on his face, but cracks immediately appeared in the hard mask, and he giggled, reminding Bam of the girls he had gone to school with. “Your camera is on the coffee table. I helped you remember it a few times last night. Saved it from a few butt crashes too,” he hummed contentedly. The smirk on his face was only too sincere. “You kept putting the damn thing on the bar stool next to you.”

Bam, kind of dazed by the fact that his idol had remembered his surname, merely nodded in response. He then exhaled deeply and let out a relieved, “Oh, thank God.”

“No, thank me,” Ville corrected him.

For a moment, Bam seriously wondered whether there was a difference between the two – and then he became painfully self-aware. Pink rose up his cheeks and he stuttered, “Y-yeah,” while willing his heart to calm the fuck down, but now that he was sober, his alcohol-induced bravado had shriveled up like a raisin. In short, he was a nervous wreck, and he just knew that if he did not leave, he would make a fool of himself in front of Ville.
“I should get going-”

“You don’t want breakfast first?”

“… I- I…” Bam swallowed hard at the tangle of words stuck in his throat. What does one say when Ville fucking Valo asks you if you want to stay for breakfast? He wanted to oblige – wanted to spend as much time as possible with his favorite musician – but he felt incredibly nervous. Besides, his schedule for the day was jam-packed and he was already running late.

“Ah, no worries, Bam.” Ville smiled and waved his hand dismissively. “Do remember your shirt. And the hoodie – I do believe it is in the closet by the door.”

Bam was about to walk away from the bed when he felt cold fingers around his wrist. He stopped dead in his tracks, drew in a sharp breath and turned around to face Ville. Something flickered in the depths of his gorgeous green eyes, something intangible.

“Bam,” he said quietly, “I want you to have my phone number.”

“… You what?”

A wicked grin curled around the Finn’s lips. He fished out a permanent marker from his hip pocket and began scribbling down his number on Bam’s forearm in huge, chunky letters. He wrote ‘Willa’ with a heart over the ‘i’ like the girls had done back in middle school. His mouth suddenly felt like it had been stuffed with cotton. Ville’s fingers pressed against his skin resulted in another serious case of gooseflesh, and he knew that Ville knew.

“Thank you,” Bam whispered, and when the green eyes shifted straight to him, sweat rushed down his back. “I, um, I…” Bam wanted slap himself silly. For whatever reason, he was being about as articulate as a drunk seagull that morning. The Finn was obviously humored by his stuttering words, his smile wide.

“I’ll keep in touch,” he said hastily. “Definitely.”

The sparkle in Ville’s eyes spelled mischief. “I’m looking forward to hearing from you,” he said sweetly, and then he buried his head back in the pillow. He obviously would not be there for the hotel breakfast.

As Bam walked out of the room, or rather he stumbled out of the room, he felt an overwhelming sense of joy coursing through his body. But parallel to this newfound sensation, a strange kind of fear had taken a hold of his heart. He was already afraid that he would lose Ville. They had bonded yesterday, but they had not exactly been sober. What if he did not wish to talk to him again if he called? And what if he forgot about the silly American altogether? Bam grimaced, and then he looked down at his wristwatch.

“… Shit,” he muttered to himself and hurried out of the hotel. He was very late.

11:49 a.m.

Ryan looked extremely relieved upon seeing Bam, and he looked even more relieved to see him with the video camera under his arm. The thing was expensive.

“Where did that Walo guy take you last night?” he demanded, his voice laced with anger and worry alike. “He didn’t try on something, did he?”
Bam frowned, momentarily confused about the harsh tone of voice, and then it dawned on him. Ryan thought that the singer had taken advantage of him. It was an outrageous and humiliating accusation, and not only because it was untrue, but because it implicated that he could not take care of himself. He did not need protection from anyone, and especially not from Ville Valo.

“You’re insane,” Bam said without raising his voice. He looked more stunned than anything, though the anger welled up inside of him like a volcano about to erupt.

“Insane? He kept ogling you all night!”

Bam snorted and crossed his arms over his chest. “D’you really think Willa fucking Walo has a thing for me?” The skater shook his head and continued before Ryan could speak. “That’s pretty ridiculous, Dunn. He can have any girl he’d like, of course he wouldn’t want to do anything with me.” In spite of his obvious annoyance, he chuckled at the absurd notion. Ryan, on the other hand, pressed his lips together in a firm line. He did not find the situation to be particularly amusing.

“Fine, whatever,” he muttered under his breath. If anything, he was glad to see that Bam was in decent shape after the long night. “I guess I was wrong about that… but…”

“But what?” Bam snapped a little more defensively. “Yesterday was pretty sweet. I don’t get why you’re so worried all of a sudden, it’s not like you at all,” he grumbled as he began taking off the oversized hoodie. He needed to change into more flexible clothes for the video they were shooting.

Ryan shook his head, worried. “You got so wasted. And then the two of you just took off, and I sat there wondering what the hell…” He folded his hands over his chest, still somewhat concerned about what had happened. His night had been restless and he had not gotten much shut-eye. “But Linde and those other guys seemed really great. We hit it off with each other. They even said…” he faltered as he noticed the name scribbled on Bam’s arm. The frown on his face looked as though it had been etched into his skin.

Bam rolled his eyes once he realized what Ryan was staring at. “It’s Willa, what did you expect…”

“Don’t let him drag you into some weird faggoty bullshit, Bam,” the redhead warned him.

Bam shot him a furious glance and yelled, “I’m not a faggot, Dunn! Jesus, are you listening to yourself?”

“I’m not saying you’re a faggot-”

“Ok, I think we’ll draw a line there,” Bam grumbled, his hands balled into tight fists. “Before I get really pissed.”

The older man heaved a sigh, but he nodded in agreement nonetheless. “Let’s get this over with,” he declared and picked up the video camera from where Bam had put it on the floor.

“Yeah, let’s.”
Bam put the photo on the radiator in the living room and sat down in front of the fireplace. There was a discolored spot on the wall just above the mantelpiece; it was square-shaped and a shade lighter than the intense magenta that covered the rest of the wall. A humored smile touched his lips despite the wistful eyes, and he wanted to ask his younger self why he had settled for magenta. The color was hideous and clashed with the beautiful, red Persian rug that covered the floor. Actually, red, magenta and violet was the recurring theme of his home – and gothic wrought-iron chandeliers, railings and other details. He really needed to redecorate the place. Sometimes, it felt as if no time had passed, as if he was living in a time capsule, and to be fair, he was.

‘You’re living in this shell of a show set,’ his mother had pointed out the other day. She had invited herself over for lunch, or rather, Nikki had invited her without informing him, and for the duration of that lunch, she had been abnormally quiet. It was about baby Ryan, of course. And the unfinished nursery upstairs – the one she had painted green. It was about the haunted look in Nikki’s eyes – the little shoes and socks he sometimes held in his hands, asking himself ‘Why me?’ because every aspect of his life had gone straight to hell. In the end, all that was left was the house, but he no longer felt at home there.

‘I know,’ he had told his mother. Then he had said, ‘I should sell it,’ and he knew Nikki would have been pleased to hear that. But April’s eyes had glazed over, and she had said, ‘Maybe your future children would like to see where it all took place,’ and yes, he agreed with her. But at one point or another, something had to change. He was living in a museum of his own life, always gawking at old relics that reminded him of this or that, of a past that was good and of a past that was bad, and the worst thing was knowing that they could never revisit that past or actually build something entirely new – something unrelated to his rise and fall from grace, and the consequences. Ryan was dead, after all, and moving on without him was as impossible as not moving on without him. The bitterness of his death – and the bitterness of losing Ville – tainted the sweetness of the good times.

Bam, in spite of unfortunate events, had always considered his house an institution of fun. This was where all the magic had happened. This was where he had made episodes of Viva La Bam with his friends and family. Yes, the house was the heart of it all, and he had wanted baby Ryan to love it as much as he had. He had wanted to hear laughter, had wanted to chase after his kiddo, had wanted to find peace. Hope was such a fickle thing! He hated it, this hope that sometimes filled every inch of
his soul, and then it shattered. In the end, it always shattered.

The couch on the other side of the table stole his attention. It was a brown leather couch like any other, one of the few pieces of furniture he owned that was not a one-of-a-kind antique, but he was fond of it nonetheless.

“Willa,” he said to himself, the word feeling foreign. Again, his eyes wandered to that discolored spot on the wall. He remembered the framed picture that had once adorned that wall, a picture of HIM – of Ville striking one of his signature poses. How come he had never replaced it? Well, it probably had something to do with the frontman, that arrogant bastard. What else was there to say about him? He grunted, annoyed with himself for thinking about him after all these years. Growing wise with age was not for him, it would seem.

Bam’s face broke into a rueful smile. He had been an even bigger idiot back in the day. His non-existent intuition had put him in a lot of awkward situations, but then again, he had been blissfully unaware. After he had befriended Ville Valo, the guy who was as skinny as a twig and had catlike, green eyes that seemed so sad most of the time, his life had changed irrevocably. When life had been too hard back in Finland, the singer had sought refuge in the US – at Castle Bam – and the blue-eyed American boy had never once told him no. When Ville had curled up to him, had showered him with attention and kissed him on the mouth, he had obliged, because why not? They had been friends. The best of friends. And Bam had always seen how lonely Ville was – how pained he was – and he had wanted to make him happy. So, he had catered to his every whim. Bam, who had always been rough with his buddies, had treated Ville with kid gloves. Bam, who made the cruelest pranks, had thrown plates at his friends for ‘mistreating’ Ville.

Ville. For about five years, he had considered the Finn a brother in all but the flesh. His naïve younger self had been observant yet clueless. He remembered the Mona Lisa smile and that strange, inward laughter that had fascinated him so. The baritone voice that rumbled so beautifully. The way those green eyes had reached out for him, talking without words, and the way they had skirted around the subject that was so obvious to onlookers. They had been hopeless.

How had he missed all the signs? It humored him on some level. And it was not just about his actions. Ville had leaned on him, and Ville, in spite of being the perfect picture of a bohemian, depressed artist, had always been independent.

Bam shook his head. Living in the past – living in a shell of a show set – was not good. It was depressing.

“Fuck you, Walo,” he grumbled and walked outside, into the ‘blizzard’, leaving the ghosts behind. For the first time in months, he walked into the garage, found a skateboard he had left behind ages ago, and started practicing.

12:21 p.m.        29.01.2003

It was cold and the ground was blanketed by white and crispy snow. The climate reminded Ville of his homeland – the ice-bound north – and he thought about some distant relatives of his who had moved to Minnesota in the early 1900s. His father had shown him pictures of them on numerous occasions throughout his childhood. The emigrants – a great-uncle and his wife and children – had sent photographs and letters to their family members in Finland, proudly showing off the huge farm they had built. A tall and dense forest had surrounded the farm, and a thick layer of snow had
covered the ground. Ville had always thought that they must have felt at home there, but he now dismissed his own idea. As he looked out from Castle Bam, he saw a world that resembled Finland. He did not feel at home. Instead, he was overwhelmed by a deep sense of melancholy, and the homesickness made his stomach ache.

Ville sighed as he saw his own reflection in the window; he looked tired somehow. Leaning a bit closer, he noticed the cold air leaking from the window, and his breath started to fog up the glass. As he withdrew from the window, he watched the cloudy spot and smiled in spite of himself. He brought his hand to the glass and drew a heart, but as soon as he realized what he had done, his brows bumped together in a scowl. Without thinking twice about it, he wiped away the condensation with the back of his hand, destroying the evidence. A nagging voice inside his head told him to get a grip.

The Finn groaned dejectedly and leaned his head against the wall. There was a sad glimmer in his eyes as he cast a bewildered glance around the room. He saw a framed poster of himself from 1999 above the antique desk by the door – memorabilia – and one of Bam’s old hoodies was draped over the back of the chair. It was the guest bedroom, but it still felt like Bam; it still smelled like him. He knew that Bam sometimes slept there when Jenn cocooned herself in the duvet, and he sometimes slept next to Ville after one drink too many. It meant nothing, of course.

The wind hissed as it dragged its back against the wall. With it came a wave of nausea, and a snowball sat in Ville’s stomach, one that would not melt. His chest felt oddly warm though, and the warmth spread like wildfire throughout his body. It was a restless feeling, and the small voice in the back of his head told him to leg it, but where could he possibly go? Anywhere, and yet nowhere.

Biting down on his lower lip, he kept himself from getting overwrought. His thoughts were still dark as he knew he was telling himself half-truths and part-truths. After numerous years of friendship, it seemed easier to live the lie. It had seemed easier. Had he been at home in Finland, he could have put on a big smile and kept on pretending, but as things were, he was in America. For whatever monstrous reason, Ville had decided that taking a break from the band would be a splendid idea. A break at Castle Bam – why not? The irony brought a flimsy smile to his lips. He realized that he now needed a break from the break, but then again, he had nowhere to run; he had nowhere to hide.

The singer emitted a sound that sounded vaguely like laughter and then buried his face in a pillow. None of it was Bam’s fault, of course not, but he still wanted to go home. Being there strengthened that unmistakable feeling – the one that made schoolgirls giggle and write names with a heart around it – and he felt as though he were going crazy. Perhaps it was cabin fever? They had hardly left the house for weeks on end. Ville frowned at the thought. According to every scary movie ever made, cabin fever was not a good sign. He thought of sticky, metallic blood and intestines and scrunch up his nose.

The door creaked open, but the singer was too preoccupied with his thoughts to hear. Only when a set of hands grabbed him by the shoulders and an all too familiar voice yelled, “Boo!” did he notice the intruder. Had Ville not been so used to Bam’s antics, he would have jumped ten feet into the air and screamed bloody murder. He just grunted in response, not even bothered to look up.

“Willa?” Bam said as he tumbled onto the bed and put his hand on Ville’s lower back. The older man muttered something unintelligible and rolled over to face Bam. His blue eyes shone with excitement and restlessness alike, always eager to cheer him up, and Ville frowned. Bam immediately picked up on his sulkiness and thought it funny that Ville sometimes accused him of being a man-child. If anyone knew how to sulk, it was Ville.

“What’s with the long face?” the skater asked, cocking an eyebrow at the Finn. Talking about
emotional stuff was not exactly Bam’s forte, but he was prepared to navigate through unfamiliar territory. The things he would do for Ville.

“Oh,” Ville said absently, “I was just thinking.”

“Well, duh, I’m not blind,” the skater said and fought the urge to tickle the Finn until he squealed like a girl. It would cure him for his bad mood, but chances were that the plan would backfire. He would hate for Ville to give him a black eye.

“What are you thinking about?” he specified.

Ville grimaced and muttered, “Nothing,” under his breath.

“Nothing, huh?”

“Well…” Ville said and blushed. Bam grinned. He knew Ville was about to open up.

“I had this silly idea as a child…” he started, and then he looked at Bam, unsure of whether he should continue or not, “that my relatives who migrated to the US would not feel homesick in Minnesota. And I thought they wouldn’t because it greatly resembles Finland in many ways…” He glanced out the window and fell quiet. The wind was strong; grey clouds rolled over the sky, and winter was everywhere. Clearing his throat, he mumbled, “With the woods and lakes… the snow…”

“… And?”

Ville blinked. “I feel it my joints – the homesickness.”

“Wait-a-minute!” Bam said in a booming voice. “I thought you said Finland’s boring?”

A weary smile surfaced on the older man’s lips. “It is the most uninteresting country in the world,” he admitted, though the smile grew larger. “Finnish people are quiet but stormy, Bam-Bam. They can only talk to one another after a bottle of vodka. In fact, I suspect that’s how most babies are made. If we did not have vodka, birth rates would have plummeted.” He chuckled at his own joke, but when he saw the confused expression on the American’s face, he said, “But it’s home. It’s quiet – people are quiet - and people here are different. Loud somehow.”

“You’re aware you just gave a very vivid description of yourself?” Bam asked, eyes tinted with mirth.

Ville let out a dry laugh. “Ah, that might be, Bam-Bam. I do, however, think that this dark and pensive nature comes in handy when writing – and singing, of course. Perhaps it is a reflection of the country in itself?” he pondered out loud, and Bam had no answer to give. “Either way, I miss it. Cold and miserable as it is, I miss it. I think my relatives in Minnesota missed it too, and they couldn’t just get on an airplane whenever. No, they were stuck. Alone.”

Bam stared at him for a long time, wondering where such thoughts even came from. He had never ever thought a thought like that before. That was probably why Ville wrote lyrics and poetry while Bam spent his days on a skateboard. He did not envy him.

“Look, Willa,” Bam said as he exhaled sharply. “You said you’d stay a couple of weeks after we finished filming for the music video, and we wrapped it up yesterday!” He chuckled, putting his hand on Ville’s shoulder. “Don’t get all sentimental just because you’ve got nothing better to do – melancholy, that’s the word. It’s forbidden under my roof,” he declared and then winked.

“But-”
“D’you want some alcohol?” he asked, hoping to lead Ville onto the righteous path. “We have a bar, y’know.”

“… We only just had breakfast,” Ville pointed out. Amusement tugged at his lips though, and he asked, “Are you an alcoholic, Bammie? You know you can talk to me, right?”

Bam snorted. “Since when does drinking during a vacation make you an alcoholic? Just because the sun ain’t shining doesn’t make us alcoholics, Willa! Besides, you’re Finnish.” He smirked upon saying the latter. “That’s a valid excuse in itself.”

The green-eyed man raised an eyebrow. “To drink?”

“Hell yeah!”

Ville laughed. It was a glorious laugh, a ha-ha laugh, the kind that Ville himself said he loathed, but whenever Bam heard it, he could not help but to laugh himself. He remembered the first time he had heard that odd, inward laugh, having expected it to sound like thunder. That first HIM concert and then the backstage meeting had become one of his most accurate and precious memories. He remembered every single detail of that day. His anxiousness had perhaps made him overly aware of his surroundings; he usually sailed through life with ease, and that day had been very different. He had taken his courage in both hands and walked through that door with a thudding heart and his stomach in knots.

“Let’s go grab a beer then,” Bam said with a final tone to his voice, and Ville raised an eyebrow, though he did not protest. A little tear shone brightly in the crook of his eye, and Bam knew it was a tear born from laughing too hard. The sight made his heart swell with pride and joy alike. After all, what could possibly be more satisfying than making Ville laugh?

“Wait, are you being serious?”

“I’m always serious,” Bam said and got out of bed. Ville followed his example, and Bam wrapped his hand around Ville’s wrist and dragged him down the stairs to the basement. There, they drank quite a few beers and talked about everything and nothing. By the time the sun had vanished behind the trees, neither of them were particularly sober. Quite similar to Ville’s explanation regarding the Finnish and alcohol, it was just what they had been in need of.

22:38 p.m.

Out of the countless rooms of Castle Bam, the bar was Ville’s favorite, and it was not solely because of the strict all-you-can-drink policy but rather because of how authentic it was. After years of friendship, Ville had never known Bam to be a man of good taste, but the bar was exceptionally consistent in style. The theme was medieval England and involved dark wood, stained glass windows and wrought iron chandeliers. Framed paintings and tapestries lined the brick walls, and while he knew that Bam had no financial worries, he still wondered about the price tags. Most items were antiquities, and Ville, who had recently invested in a neo-gothic grain silo from 1840, constantly worried about restoration costs. He hoped the house, which had fallen into disrepair after years of neglect, would become habitable in the near future. It seemed unlikely.

“You’re supposed to be drunk, Willa,” Bam commented and shoved a bottle of wine into his hands. “Here, I don’t like wine – you’ll drink it for me.”

Ville smiled. “I think I’ve had my fair share of alcohol as it is, Bammie,” he said softly while reading
the label. It went without saying that it was a fine bottle of wine, and even if Bam was proud to admit that he did not know the first thing about ‘fancy European grape juice’, he knew it was too precious to waste on a drunk friend.

“Keep it.”

“What?” Ville shook his head. “No-no, I’m not keeping it. Give it to Jenn.”

Bam let out a loud, hearty laugh and said, “Jenn prefers Bud to anything French. So do I. Guess we’re white trash, huh?”

Ville raised an eyebrow at the comment. “That’s crude, Bam,” he said and held the bottle up under the younger man’s nose, but Bam completely ignored him.

“Either way,” he said and pushed the bottle back toward Ville, “you’re keeping the damn thing – or I’ll pour it down the toilet.” He smirked once he saw the first sign of surrender in Ville’s eyes. “You know I’ll do it. A hundred bucks down the drain, Willa.”

The Finn gave up on returning the gift. “If you say so,” he muttered and put the bottle down on the bar counter.

“Don’t pout, Willa,” Bam commented and nudged the Finn in the shoulder. “I’ve got a few bottles just waiting – see anything you like?”

Ville rolled his eyes and said, “You’re not giving me any more booze,” though his eyes wandered to the enormous backbar, which was full of exclusive and expensive spirits. He spotted a bottle of Koskenkorva next to the impressive collection of Russian vodka and was immediately reminded of nights he would rather forget. Back in Finland, he often ended up drinking himself into a stupor with his coworkers. Vodka was their beverage of choice. They all lived to regret it the morning after, but by the time another week had gone by, they had all forgotten about their ailments and lumbered back to the bar. It was a vicious circle.

“Homesick again?” Bam asked, having noticed that the normally sharp, green eyes had glazed over.

“… Slightly,” the older man admitted with a sigh. “It’s strange, perhaps. I have known the guys for the majority of my life, and they get on my nerves and rely on me for everything that’s got to do with the band, but I still miss them.” He grunted. “Bastards.”

“Willa,” Bam murmured. “You’re here, not there.”

Ville nodded. “Indeed, but the mind is a mysterious place.” As he said this, he looked up from his hands and noticed how the light from the candlelit chandelier cast a soft and golden glow upon Bam’s face. His eyes shone with warmth and youth, and Ville knew he was a rare specimen. There was something profound within him; something wise. He was undeniably immature in his demeanor, but if one stripped him of all his TV persona, what remained was a simplistic kind of intelligence. It was hidden in plain sight, though it was glaringly obvious once one had taken notice of it. Once one had looked into his eyes as if it was for the first time, one was bound to see it, and one was bound to know it better than Bam himself knew it.

“You’re not falling asleep on me, are you?” Bam eventually asked. “You’re not allowed to fall asleep right now, d’you hear me?”

“Mm,” Ville hummed. He rested his chin in his palm and smiled sleepily. “Maybe. Beer makes me sleepy, but you already knew that, Bam-Bam.”
“No-no-no,” the American said and got up from the barstool. “That’s not alright, Willa – you’re my guest.”

“But I’m tired,” the Finn whined and rubbed his eyes. “Dead on my feet, really. You had me working from eight a.m. to eight p.m. every day.” A deep furrow appeared between his eyebrows. “If it weren’t for my precious cigarettes, I would have been dead by now.”

“Yeah, poor Willa, had to show up for work.”

The older man let out a dramatic sigh and said, “Everything falls apart without me.”

Bam rolled his eyes. “Well, it’s hard to shoot a music video without a vocalist, isn’t it?” he asked, voice caught somewhere between irritation and amusement, and then he suggested, “Let’s watch a movie or something. I think the candlelight is making you sleepy.”

“I suppose that is doable,” the green-eyed man replied. “As long as it isn’t a comedy. I get enough wittiness from you as it is, little American.”

Bam grinned. “Deal!”

The two men then stumbled their way up the stairs. Bam, who was drunk and happy, held his arm around Ville’s waist – he was, after all, too short to put his arm around his shoulders – and trolled a note or two. Ville, who was less drunk but completely carefree, was finally glad to have some time to kill. He was glad to be away from home; glad to be away from work. It dawned on him that the incessant background noise that filled his life had taken a toll on him, on his psyche, and it had nearly driven him up the wall. His thoughts had been erratic.

Bam settled on the couch in the TV room while Ville looked through his vast collection of VHS cassettes and DVDs. After a couple of minutes, he held up an old and battered copy of ‘Evil Dead’ and deemed it ‘an old classic’. Bam was not over the moon about having to sit through that movie again. It was one of those movies he had watched a thousand times throughout his childhood, but regardless of his disinterest in it, he caved in without protest. He did not have the heart to tell Ville no, especially not after the homesickness had descended upon him.

“I remember this movie,” Ville said with a nostalgic smile on his lips, though the storyline resided in the fog of memory. “Dad picked it up for me when I was twe- no, I was eleven. It scared me senseless.”

“Yeah, I’ve always said that you’re a total wuss, Walo,” the skater teased good-naturedly. “D’you want me to fetch you a pillow?”

“What on earth would I need a pillow for?”

Bam grinned. “To hide behind, or to drown your screams.”

Ville rolled his eyes. “Ha-ha,” he said and inserted the cassette into the slot. “What did I just say? I get enough wittiness from you to last me a lifetime.” He frowned and pressed the ‘on’ button, but nothing happened. “Or two lifetimes, I suppose.”

“Wasn’t really what you said,” Bam commented with a sly smile on his lips. “You said you didn’t want to watch a comedy ‘cause I’m witty enough on my own.”

“This isn’t working, Bam,” the Finn complained when the screen remained black. He handed Bam the remote control and stared dumbly at the television, and as he stood there and wondered why nothing had happened, Bam’s face was brimming with suppressed laughter.
“… You’ve got to plug the cord into the electrical outlet first, Willa,” he pointed out and then let out a booming laugh. Ville’s face remained untouched by the ridicule, but his ears turned slightly red.

“Right. Sorry,” he muttered.

After about twenty minutes of watching, Ville remembered that ‘Evil Dead’ was a low budget splatter movie, one he had watched as a kid. Every American movie had been considered a monstrosity back then, always over the top and full of gory action, and his memory had cheated him. He was aware that it had gained cult status among youngsters, and while he could stretch himself to gain and understanding of why, he still had to laugh at his younger self.

“I never realized how bad this movie actually is,” Ville said, which caused Bam to laugh.

“No shit, dude. The zombie thing stabbed his foot with a fucking pencil,” he commented. “A fucking pencil!”

“It’s a demon, not a zombie,” the Finn corrected him; Bam rolled his eyes.

“Alright, Mr. I-know-it-all, the demon stabbed him with a fucking pencil. Happy?”

“Mm,” Ville hummed. “And now she’s getting sexually assaulted by a tree…”

“Oh, please,” the younger man said and nudged him playfully in the arm. “It’s obviously a thorn bush, not a goddamn tree. And she’s enjoying it – see?”

 “… Bush,” Ville repeated. They both laughed.

When there was nothing left to laugh about, the two men stopped paying attention to the movie and started chatting away about their joined vacation. Bam had a couple of interesting ideas regarding how they could keep busy, most of which included putting Ville on a skateboard. Ville, who was known for getting asthma attacks every now and then, declined the offer. He would rather sit back and relax, which was something he rarely had the opportunity to do back in Helsinki.

“Just a friendly word of advice, Willa,” the American said and fished the pack of cigarettes out of Ville’s shirt pocket, “quit smoking. It probably isn’t great for your asthma either.”

“I’ve got my inhaler,” the green-eyed man argued. “Besides, I have made no plans to survive life.”

Bam raised an eyebrow. “That’s pretty dark, bro.”

“It’s just life, Bam,” Ville said and reached his hand out in an attempt to snatch the pack of cigarettes out of Bam’s grip, but he was too slow. Bam had the reflexes of a feline, and he felt a smug satisfaction in knowing he was physically superior to the singer. He had to smile.

“And life is lived in the shadow of death,” Ville continued grumpily, “so why shouldn’t I smoke? I’d simply fool myself by thinking that by not getting lung cancer, I would not die from a heart attack.”

“Fine – take the damn thing,” Bam grumbled and handed him the stolen cancer sticks. Immediately after, an uncomfortable silence fell over them and made them squirm in their seats. When neither had anything to say, they went back to watching the rest of the movie. Ville, who felt somewhat guilty for having upset his friend, kept glancing sideways. He caught himself every time and forced his
gaze downward, afraid that Bam would notice his wandering eyes.

The movie eventually reached its end. The younger man switched off the television and smiled a knowing smile, well aware that the Finn felt guilty.

“Well,” he said and laughed softly, “that was lame.”

“Lame indeed.”

“Hey, whatever happened to that Jonna girl?” Bam asked suddenly. He remembered that Ville had mentioned her a few times before he had come to the US. Back then, the relationship had sounded like a big deal, but he had failed to mention her again after his arrival. It was as though she had never existed.

“Oh, her,” Ville said and gave a mirthless laugh. “She… I don’t even know what to say,” he muttered, and while he did not let his anger shine through the carefully constructed façade, Bam saw it reflected in his eyes. “I can’t seem to figure her out – women, you know?”

“Oh, I guess?”

Ville bit his lower lip and thought about the woman in question. “I’m not sure she even knows what she wants from me anymore, and I sure as hell don’t have a goddamn clue,” he said in a raised voice and looked at Bam with a strangled expression on his face. “She’s just – she’s there.”

“What d’you mean ‘there’?”

The Finn raked his fingers through his tousled, long hair and muttered, “She lives in my flat in Helsinki for now, but…” he trailed off, looking Bam straight in the eye, “it’s history.”

Bam frowned. “What, she stays at your place, but you’re not really in a relationship?”

“Yeah, something like that,” the singer admitted. “We have not actually ended things – not formally – but we both know it won’t work out.”

The skater drew his lip between his teeth; he felt as though something was off about the scenario.

“Maybe you’re just overthinking things again,” he said, voicing his concerns. Because he had been friends with Ville for a few years, he knew that he had a melancholic streak. It sometimes got the better of him. “Maybe she isn’t half bad?”

Ville raised an eyebrow at the comment. “Seriously, Bam?” he asked and tilted his head to the side. “Do you want to date someone who isn’t ‘half bad’, as you say?”

“Alright, alright.” The younger man raised his hands in surrender and let out a quiet laugh. “But when you called me up before Christmas, you were that into her. I don’t get it. And knowing you, she’s probably a ten – no, an eleven!”

The green-eyed man sighed. He wondered when Bam would finally understand, and then he wondered why he could not be upfront about his feelings. Life was not that simple. Jonna had been a rare gem – a model with a great personality – and Ville had been lucky. Had it not been for the fact that he was about as straight as a noodle, he would have been really lucky. Then again, life was anything but simple. He had not even been fully honest with himself yet; how could he be honest with Bam?

“It feels very intense in the heat of the moment, but…” he faltered, unable to describe his rather complicated affair with Jonna to someone like Bam. To Bam, things were either one way or the other
– black and white – but nothing in between. He was too young to catch all the nuances; all the layers
of gray. “When we’re apart, I don’t miss her. I don’t think much about her, and I think she feels the
same way.” He paused and watched the puzzled look on Bam’s face. “But when I’m with her, we
can’t stay away from one another. It’s something of a curse, really.”

“Damn, that’s fucked up,” was all Bam managed to say. “Sounds like a serious case of friends with
benefits.”

Ville snorted. “I hardly think we’re even friends. We have little in common – just the passion of
living in the present.” He looked somewhat sad about the latter part, almost as if he berated himself
for letting certain urges be in control. “I’d go as far as to say we dislike one another,” he added
quietly, and the words sounded horrible even to his own ears.

“What?” Bam said and stared at his friend in wide-eyed surprise. “Ville… come on, why are you
with someone you don’t even like? It’s stupid as fuck.”

For a moment, the two men looked at one another and attempted to read each other’s minds. The
singer eventually averted his gaze, too embarrassed to lay his soul bare.

“It’s a strictly physical attraction between the two of us…” Ville admitted when the silence had gone
on for too long. His voice was strained and somber; it shivered like an autumn leaf in the icy wind.
“The brain is a strange place, Bam, and all our desires are driven by hormones and chemistry.” He
licked his lips and made eye contact with the skater, daring to speak openly. “So, in brief, all things
that happen are purely coincidental. We do what we do – we fuck who we fuck, and that’s that.
That’s life.”

Another half-truth. Ville felt like hitting his head against the wall. For all that he was gay, he was
also an esthetician; he worshipped beauty. Jonna was the most beautiful woman he had ever met, and
he loved being seen with her nearly as much as he loved worshipping her slender, statuesque body.
But when they were met by the silence of their private conversations, they both realized that the
books in their shelves meant about as much as the hollow exchange of the phrase ‘I love you’. Ville
had never said that well-worn phrase to someone he had truly loved. It was yet another sad fact about
his seemingly perfect existence, a fact which weighed heavily on his heart now that he sat next to
Bam.

“Are you happy though?” the younger one wanted to know, but when he dipped into the murky
waters of Ville’s eyes, he already knew the answer.

“Do you believe in happiness, Bam?” the Finn asked in a calm voice that did not cohere with the
cold sting of his stare. “Happiness. It’s kind of like good versus evil, isn’t it? Like in some stupid
fairytale. It just isn’t that easy, Bam – it isn’t that bloody easy.” Upon saying these words, his
normally tasteful cynicism was transformed into something less delicate. A pained expression marred
his flawless, ageless, white face as he asked in a low, resentful tone, “It is a momentary thing, isn’t it?
Like an orgasm, or having ice-cream. And then the guilt comes.”

The skater furrowed his brows at what Ville had said. “That’s bullshit, Walo, and you know it.”

“And you and Jenn are still going strong?”

Bam shrugged, ignoring the heavy sarcasm. “Things aren’t bad.”

“What does that even mean?”

The younger man bit his lower lip. He was more than a little frustrated with Ville, and that was
uncommon. Out of all his friends, Ville was the only person he respected. He was the only person he trusted to have his wits about him. “I like her, she likes me – and we’re both having fun. No guilt.”

“… Then I suppose it’s just me making a mess of things,” the vocalist said quietly, perhaps mostly to himself, and Bam could not have agreed more.

“You wanna know something?” Bam asked, and Ville nodded his head slowly.

“What’s that?”

“You think too much about everything,” the skater said in a firm tone of voice. “And when you think too much, well, that takes away the fun of living in the moment… and it makes fun things seem sinful…” He paused. Deep furrows appeared on his forehead. “It makes you fucking miserable, Willa. Stop it, calm down and just do what I do.” He smiled reassuringly and said, “Do whatever the fuck you want. That’s the only way to live a happy, fulfilling life.”

The vocalist fell silent. A thoughtful look descended upon his face. While he knew that Bam was right – at least partially – he could not bring himself to ‘do what the fuck he wanted’, as Bam had put it. Had Ville let his guard down and simply followed his heart, it would have ruined too much for too many people.

“You’re right, Bammie,” he said, and he leaned his head on Bam’s shoulder and relished his warmth. Bam instinctively put an arm around Ville, and neither of them thought anything of it. Being close to Ville was the most natural thing in the world; he would have it no other way. They would often sit close, sleep in the same bed, cuddle up to one another when they were drunk and hold one another when life was unbearable. Bam knew life was unbearable that day. He stroked his hand down Ville’s arm, wishing to comfort him. The Finn, who had not anticipated the caress, shivered. Bam pulled back and looked at Ville’s face. He noticed that he looked rather flustered, almost feverish, and his eyes were glassy.

“Are you cold, Walo?” he asked, worried that he was coming down with something.

“No,” Ville whispered hoarsely. “I’m fine – don’t baby me, Bam.”

The younger man rolled his eyes at him and extended his free hand to fetch the blanket on the armchair next to the couch. He put it over the frontman, who huffed a little, but he looked content nonetheless. They fell asleep like that, and when April stopped by the house the following day, she found them both passed out on the couch, limbs tangled together and Ville drooling all over Bam’s favorite tee-shirt. She thought nothing of it.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are appreciated <3
“Brandon,” the woman, Eliza Adler, said with a smile that was more professional than friendly. She was an older woman, close to retirement age, and she looked as though she had spent the majority of her life seated behind a desk. Her gray hair was cut in a short, sleek bob to the bottom of her neck. She was a petite woman, no taller than five foot four, and wore a navy blue blazer, a white blouse and khaki pants. Bam thought that the polished appearance matched her no-nonsense attitude, and while she could be both stern and somewhat aloof, at least in Bam’s eyes, she had a high success rate and nearly forty years of experience.

“Dr. Adler,” he said awkwardly and shook her hand. As he sat down, the leather squeaked underneath him.

“You look good, Brandon,” she said, already taking notes. “I see you have lost quite a bit of weight since last time?”

“It’s Bam,” he corrected her, suppressing the urge to roll his eyes at the use of his birth name. “And yeah, I’ve slimmed down. I’ve stayed away from the booze and the, uh, the emotional eating.” He smiled nervously, his hands folded neatly in his lap. “I’ll soon be getting that forth sobriety chip.”

The gray-haired woman smiled the same stiff smile that was designed for her patients. It made Bam shudder. She was undoubtedly intelligent and educated, but her polite pleasantries were artificial to the point where it became uncomfortable. A five-year-old would have seen through that smile of hers. Bam felt like pointing it out. He would, however, wait until he was sufficiently cured for his alcoholism, or the ‘underlying causes’, which was the term Dr. Adler used.

“I’m glad to hear that you’re making progress. Not everyone can turn their lives around like you have done,” she praised him and scribbled even more notes from the conversation. The sound of the pen scratching the paper made Bam nervous, glancing down at his shoes. “Is there a special reason you wanted to see me again?”

“Yeah… or no… I don’t know… I,” he mumbled, finding it difficult to articulate his emotions. Over the last couple of days, he had been walking around in a daze. The change had come suddenly and without forewarning; sleep had become unattainable and his brain felt fried. In his mind, nothing could justify or explain the change, and that was why he sat in Dr. Adler’s office.

“I just… don’t know how to explain,” he said after some time, feeling defeated. “I feel different.”

“… Different?” she echoed. “How so?”
Bam gave her a long look before shrugging.

“Just… not like myself,” he said quietly.

The psychologist put her pencil down and made eye contact with the younger man. She noticed that his hand covered one of the tattoos on his left arm, the one located on the inside of his elbow. When the hand fell, she saw that he had been hiding two joined hearts. Perhaps he sought comfort from whatever it symbolized? A slight frown became visible on her face, though she remained silent about her observation.

“Be honest, Brandon,” she said, eying him suspiciously. “Are you doing better or worse?”

The skater drew in a long breath before giving a humorless laugh. After he had started collecting sobriety coins, every conversation had boiled down to questions of that nature, questions that centered around his alcoholism and recovery. It filled him with indignation. All such questions were followed by the ‘I feel bad for your parents and wife’ look, as though he were severely handicapped.

“I’m not drinking,” he muttered sourly.

Dr. Adler smiled one of those smiles again.

“I can see that,” she said in a softer tone of voice. “But regardless of your sobriety, are you doing alright, Brandon?”

“I don’t even know anymore,” he admitted, his voice lowered to a mere whisper. “Things aren’t good at home. I mean, me and Nikki, we’ve been struggling.”

“After the miscarriage?”

Bam had to close his eyes at the mentioned trauma. Mental images of bloodstained sheets flashed through his mind, and he could hear her saying his name in between sobs and gasps. He had held her for a long time before they had come to terms with the loss, held her while she had prayed to a God Bam did not believe in, and for a miracle that could not come into existence. The blood had already been there, as crimson and as unforgiving as any of the Devil’s tricks, and there was no one there to help, least of all God.

“… No,” Bam said quietly and stared at the wall. “Or maybe. She doesn’t tell me anything, not anymore,” he continued while rubbing his temples vigorously. A frown marred his features, his lips thinning out into a line. He often felt lonely, and in recent years, he had figured out that loneliness could be experienced in spite of constant company. “She keeps pushing me away – I can’t do anything right – and we don’t even fight, you know? She just shuts me out completely.” The frown melted away. It was replaced by a mournful expression that bordered on shamefulness, as though he did not entirely believe in his own explanation.

“We have all spoken to one another,” Dr. Adler pointed out and leaned back in the blood-red Chesterfield armchair, tilting her head slightly in an inquiring manner. “She did not come across as someone who is reticent about her personal affairs. In all fairness, she came across as both honest and sincere when we talked about your relationship.”

Bam bit his lower lip and said, “She never talks to me about anything personal. She’s… I don’t know, she’s just…” He looked down at his hands, unable to meet the older woman’s steady gaze. “Distant,” he finished lamely.

To Dr. Adler, the thirty-seven-year-old man looked haunted. His eyes were bloodshot and dark circles hung underneath. She wondered what kept him from falling asleep at night. When Mrs.
Margera had come along for a couple of lengthy conversations, she had gotten the impression that their relationship lacked emotional depth and comfort. Bam was detached from her.

“Or is it the other way around?” she wondered, and Bam looked as though she had caught him red-handed.

“… I guess that’s… I guess that’s true.”

“Why?”

The blue-eyed man held his breath as he pondered the question. After rehab – after getting sober – he had felt depressed about his marriage. Nikki had been a beacon, another perfect woman ready to sacrifice everything in order to make him a better man, and while it had perhaps worked, it had distanced him from her. She was completely devoted to him, but had he been as honest with her? The thought made him feel sick to his stomach. Honesty. If he were to confess to his lies, then maybe it would become real. Maybe he would become the monster he thought he was, the one he kept hidden behind a mask of pleasantries and jokes. But after years and years of misery, what did it matter anymore?

“I don’t feel close to her in that way,” he finally blurted out. “I-I don’t think I ever have! For fuck’s sake,” he sobbed and buried his face in his hands. It left him exposed, as though his soul was laid bare before the woman and her scrutinizing stare. His heart was thudding painfully in his chest; it knocked against his ribcage and threatened to tear its way through flesh and bone.

Dr. Adler pushed a handkerchief into his right hand.

“Brandon,” she said and waited for him to gather his thoughts, “take a deep breath.”

He inhaled sharply. Then, as soon as he opened his eyes and saw the questioning look on her face, he despaired anew and whispered, “I’m a fucking idiot,” under his breath.

“No. Of course not, Brandon,” Dr. Adler said in a compassionate voice that did not cohere with her usual mask of professionalism. “But you have to sort yourself out, and not only for your own good. A marriage is a union between two people who love and support each other.” She regarded him with a sad look on her face, aware that he was harboring a guilty secret. “A husband and wife both trust and confide in one another,” she continued, and her gray eyes seemed to bore into his. “Wouldn’t you agree, Brandon? Your wife is probably just as confused as you are at this point.”

Bam hesitated. He cast his eyes down at his hands, both of them scarred and calloused, and he looked at the wedding ring, the one he had designed himself. Nikki had been over the moon about the unique rings, the fairy tale wedding and the long, expensive honeymoon.

“Yeah, I… I know that,” he said and once again covered his tattoo with his hand. “But what should I tell her?”

“You have to come to a conclusion,” she answered softly and scribbled down more notes. He wondered if she ever read though those notes, or if they simply helped her think more clearly. “A marriage should not serve as a distraction.”

“… A distraction?” Bam frowned. “From what?”

“I see you keep covering that tattoo,” she finally pointed out.

“I-I,” Bam stuttered and then said nothing for a few seconds. “I didn’t even notice.”
“I know,” she said quietly. “What does it symbolize?”

Bam had a look of alarm on his face. “I-I should go,” he declared and hurriedly rose from his seat.

“Brandon?” the woman asked, sounding concerned for the first time during their session.

“Yeah, um, goodbye,” he said and then fled from the office. His throat felt tight. Warm tears trickled down his face, and his fingers were still wrapped around the tattoo, covering it up and keeping it close.

As he reached the car, he simply got in and sat there with his fists buried in his hair, trying his best to calm down. Without the alcohol to numb his insides, he felt each pulsation of his heart; he felt each tear that sprang from his eyes. He hated the fact that his biggest secret had been hidden in plain sight – it had taken her mere minutes to pick him apart – and he had spent a decade covering it up. His breath hitched when he felt his own hand clasped around the inside of his elbow, once again seeking comfort from the tattoo. As he removed the trembling hand, he studied the simplistic drawing and felt even more wetness spilling from his eyes.

He looked into the rear-view mirror. The eyes and face that met him were foreign, at least for a split second, and he let out another strangled sob. He wished that Ryan could have been there with him. Ryan had always known how to deal with Bam’s emotional rollercoaster, and he had always been able to make him laugh, even during the darkest hours of his life.

A sudden flare of rage came over him. He thrust his fist against the rear-view mirror, causing it to cave in and fall to the floor with a less dramatic thud. Bam let out a yelp and studied his hand. His knuckles were bleeding, and fragments of the shattered mirror were buried in his skin.

“That was awesome, Willa,” Bam declared once he had finished the song. “Wish I knew how to speak Finnish, but I can’t even pronounce your name properly, so that probably won’t happen in this...
Ville lifted his right shoulder in a half shrug. “Well, you do know how to curse in Finnish,” he said, and a good-natured smirk slid onto his face. He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the railing. “You have a filthy mouth, Bam-Bam.”

The American smiled slyly at the comment. “Well,” he began, his eyes sparkling with mirth, “I’m getting it from someone, you know. You’re all soft-spoken in English, but in Finnish? You’re much worse than I am!” He grinned from one ear to the other. “I’m bound to pick up a few words from you.”

“Indeed.” Ville poured himself another glass of beer, his fifth so far, and nearly finished it in one gulp. Bam thought about fetching another ice-cold bottle of liquid gold for himself, seeing as the old one had gotten lukewarm, but the Finn spoiled his plan by asking, “D’you want to go swimming in the lake? The water isn’t terribly warm, but—”

“Fuck yeah,” Bam said and realized he probably smelled like a skunk from being out in the sun all day, sweating like crazy. “It’d be nice to cool off.”

“My thought exactly,” Ville grinned and swigged the remainder of his beer. “It’s too bloody hot!”

Bam chuckled at the bizarre complaint. “Oh, come on, Walo, we’re in Finland. Unless Russia starts launching atomic bombs at you, I don’t think summer here will ever be ‘too bloody hot’ for anything but skiing – maybe.”

“… Oh, I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” the Finn said in a humored tone of voice. “Maybe the US will beat them to the punch. Now, let’s get going.”

Bam was about to come with a clever retort, but when the Finn started discarding of his clothes right then and there, he was struck dumb. He held his breath as he watched and thought that surely he would stop once he had stripped down to his underwear, but no, even the purple underpants ended up on the deck. Ville was suddenly gloriously naked under the sun, his long, pale limbs fully exposed to prying eyes. For a moment, Bam could not help himself; he peered curiously at the bared torso and the tattoos he had rarely seen in person. When Ville turned around to face him, he blushed and looked away, embarrassed to have been caught staring.

“Bam, why aren’t you getting undressed?”

The younger man nearly choked on his beer and started coughing into his hand.

“What?” Ville asked, raising an eyebrow. “I’ve seen you naked hundreds of times, Bam.”

“… Uh, yeah,” Bam said while keeping his eyes fixed on Ville’s face. He then finished his beer in one gulp, thinking he would need the extra alcohol in his blood. Once the can had been emptied, he looked at the pile of clothes on the deck and reddened at the sight of the purple underpants. He had never been prudish – he had been naked on television countless times, and he had seen all his friends in the nude. Seeing Ville naked was something else though, and it confused him. What was so different about the Finn, after all?

“I’ll just… I’ll just get rid of my clothes, then.” He chuckled awkwardly and put the empty beer can down.

Ville’s brows furrowed into a frown. He studied Bam’s face and saw that a light tint of red shaded his cheeks, and he was not sunburned. “Oh Jesus, Bammie,” he said, rolling his eyes at his embarrassment, and then cracked up laughing. Bam laughed too. He knew he was being immature.
“Come on then,” Ville said as soon as Bam was clad in his birthday suit. “I’ll race you!”

“I’m too lazy to run,” Bam said. “I’m on vacation.”

“Come on, Bam! Live a little, will you?”

The Finn suddenly sprinted toward the dock at full speed. He was full of childish glee – the kind kept reserved for after-parties – and to Bam, who had always known him to be reserved and quiet, it was like seeing a different person altogether. What surprised him even more was how able-bodied he was. His legs, long and thin, carried him as effortlessly as a leaf sailing in the wind, and this in spite of the twenty cigarettes he smoked on a daily basis. He supposed that the long walks somehow made up for the black lungs, seeing as he had never gotten around to get his driver’s license. Bam knew that he was terrified of traffic. The first time he had played chauffeur for Ville – it had been on his first trip to Philly – the Finn had held onto the grab-handle for dear life, shouting, ‘Sweet Jesus, Bam!’ Apparently cars did not drive as fast back in Finland, and people – excluding the suicidal ones – did not die in traffic. He still did not drive though. Bam had actually rented a car for the week and was once again employed as Ville’s chauffeur. When he had asked him how he normally got to the cabin, which was located in the middle of nowhere, he had huffed and gestured meaningfully at the air, and of course, no clear answer had been given.

“Hey!” the singer shouted encouragingly, and Bam did not hesitate to follow his friend to the dock, but he kept his distance. Something about the scenario felt off. Ville had always been reserved and quiet, quite the stereotypical Finn, and this playful behavior was out of character. Bam supposed he had gotten more drunk than usual; the summer was, after all, very hot, and it was easy to get dehydrated, especially when one avoided water at all costs.

“You’re slow, Bammie!” the Finn yelled, but Bam merely waved his hand dismissively.

“We’ve got all day, Walo!”

After a minute or two, they reached the dock. Ville waited impatiently by the small diving board, and as soon as Bam stood next to him, he stuck his tongue out at him and said, “You’re so slow.”

“What’s gotten into you?” the American asked. “Heat stroke?”

Ville rolled his eyes dramatically and said, “I’m getting one soon, waiting for your saggy ass. You’re impossible, Bammie.”

“I’m not the one-”

“Impossible!” the Finn yelled, grabbing the younger man by the arm and jumping off the dock. Bam yelped and panicked as his head disappeared below the surface, feeling as though he were about to drown. When he came back up again, spluttering water and blinking profusely, all he could hear was the sound of Ville laughing.

“Oh, God!” he laughed while clutching his stomach. “T-that was priceless, Bam-Bam.”

“Walo,” the skater grumbled irritably, but without real anger. Now that he was no longer at risk of premature death, he relished the feeling of cool water against his skin. “Don’t pull any more shit like that!”

The Finn shook his head. “What’s that word you always call me?” he asked contemplatively, resting his chin on his fist. “Ah, right. I believe the word I’m looking for is ‘wuss’?”

“More like ‘pussy’. Suits you more.”
Ville smiled wryly and then drew in a deep breath. Before Bam could say another word, he went back underwater. In spite of his asthma, he was good at both swimming and diving and made a grand show out of holding his breath for up to a minute at a time. This worried the younger man to some extent. Ville had been drinking quite heavily that day and had nearly lost his balance on the deck once or twice. The Finn was, however, a diffuse drunk; he seemed quite the same after a small amount of alcohol as he did after a significant amount.

Bam, who had been immersed in thought, suddenly realized that he had lost sight of the Finn altogether. Alarmed, he started shouting, “Ville!” over and over.

And then someone splashed him from behind. The sound of Ville’s familiar inward laughter caused him to groan. “Willa,” he said warningly as he spun around to face the older man, but no sooner had he said that than Ville started spraying and splashing him.

“Oh, you fucking dipshit!” Bam yelled and splashed back, only to be surprised when he felt Ville’s hands on his shoulder from behind. He dunked him under water, causing Bam to panic. He was not a great swimmer, and he had always been wary of water. Because of this, he started swinging his arms around quite wildly, hitting something hard in the process. He then felt hands under his armpits. Ville lifted him back up to the surface.

Bam coughed and spluttered. Ville was still holding him, their bodies pressed together.

“What the hell,” he said once he had managed to calm down again. “What-the-hell, Walo?”

“I’m so sorry,” Ville said, his voice small. Only then did Bam realize he had hit him with his fist across the eyebrow. Blood oozed from a small wound.

“Shit,” he muttered while inwardly cursing himself for being such a kid. “I hit you.”

“Yeah… Does it bleed?” Ville asked tentatively. Bam bit his lip and nodded. “A little. You good?” Ville smiled. “Of course. I’m a grown man, Bam. I can take a small beating,” he stated, but Bam was not convinced.

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“How?”

“Well, I could’ve… um…”

Bam suddenly remembered that they were both stark naked. Ville still held him protectively in his arms, and Bam felt overly aware of the situation. The Finn must have read his mind. He gently let go of Bam and allowed for some space between them.

“No need for that, Bammie,” he assured him with a smile that was all but sincere.

“Willa,” Bam said silently. The older man shot him a nervous glance, and Bam suddenly felt his heart drop to the pit of his stomach. Something was off about the situation. He gave Ville a long and questioning look, and then he asked, “What… what’s going on?”

Ville said nothing, feigning a confused look. Bam heaved a sigh of frustration.

“Like, I know you wanted time off, but why aren’t you with your girlfriend, or your family even? They probably don’t get much alone time with you, and yet here we are.” He paused for a moment, terrified to ask the next question, but he knew he had to. “Why?” he asked quietly, his voice weak.
“Why are we here?”

Upon hearing the question, Ville pressed his lips together in a firm line, silently wowing not to speak. A thousand painful emotions flickered across his face though, speaking volumes about his state of mind, and as he gazed up and locked eyes with the younger man, his lips twitched. Bam had never been good at reading people – especially not Ville – but the unshed tears that shimmered in his eyes made him feel as though the world was about to end. In all the years he had known Ville, he had never seen him cry.

“What, you suddenly lost your tongue?” The skater offered him a friendly smile. “That’d be kinda bad for the band, wouldn’t it?”

The joke did little to ease the tension. Ville looked down toward the shore, and for a moment, he pondered whether he should flee or muster up the courage to speak. As he considered his two meagre options, he felt like it was now or never, but how could he just spill it like that? It felt impossible, and the consequences could be dire.

“Hey,” Bam said and moved closer, but the Finn kept his distance. Bam sighed. “Hey, Willa, I’m supposed to be the childish one, right?” he asked teasingly. “You’re the one being impossible right now.”

The vocalist looked forlorn and thought about quitting while the going was good, but he found that it was too late; he was caught in a trap of his own making. They were in the lake for a reason, and if Ville had not lured Bam into the water, he never would have had to reveal the secret that gnawed at his brain. Now that Bam could see the despair reflected in his eyes, he knew that he had been cornered. He simply had to speak, there was no way around it, not this time.

“… Bammie,” he whispered weakly, swimming closer to the American. Bam made sure not to break eye contact with the older man, though the look on his face was that of utter bewilderment. “I… I’m really sorry.”

“Enough with the apologies,” the skater said and willed another smile to his lips. “Just… just tell me. I’ll never hate you or anything stupid like that, and you know that. I know you do.”

Ville nodded, though he could not be sure. Neither one of them could be sure.

“I…” He let out a shaky breath, his eyes still drawn to the shore. “I invited you here because… well, first and foremost because I have missed you. But…” Chancing a look in Bam’s direction, Ville saw that he was nervously nibbling on his lower lip. How he regretted his decision to speak. There was, however, no turning back. “But… deep down, I… I’ve always felt this thing between the two of us – and I may have, I don’t know, created this idea inside my fucked up mind, or something like that…” He paused and swallowed thickly, struggling to hold the sobs back. “I’ve felt… I’ve felt an attraction toward you since the day we… since the day we met. And as we grew close, that attraction grew into… into something bigger.”

Ville looked heartbroken as he released the secret he had nurtured for so many years, tears rolling down his pale face, eventually merging with the lake. Bam felt like someone had punched him in the gut. His mouth went dry, almost as though someone had stuffed it with cotton, and his skin started tingling unpleasantly. Ryan had been right all along: Ville had wanted something from him. It made him shudder, unsure of how to feel about it, and all he could do was stare at the older man in dumbfounded silence.

“So… I suppose you can hate me,” Ville whispered hoarsely, “and never talk to me again now… now that you know.” Muffled sobs wracked his thin body, and he doubled over, unable to help
himself. The pain was unbearable; the shocked look on Bam’s face was unbearable.

“Willa,” the skater said quietly and put a hand on his shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. Looking up, Ville saw tears in Bam’s eyes. “Please, don’t fucking cry, Willa… then I’ll start crying and… fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck…”

The singer looked surprised. “… You’re not… you’re not leaving?” he asked, though his voice cracked as the tears ate away at him.

“No,” the younger one said firmly. “No… I just… I’m so confused.”

“… Okay?”

Bam then laughed nervously, as had become a habit through his Jackass antics. If something hurt, he just laughed it off. Ville looked concerned upon witnessing this behavior, though he understood that Bam was shocked by what he had just been told.

“Willa,” he said once he managed to stop the stream of nervous laughter. “I… Look, I absolutely fucking adore you and your music, and I…” He paused and looked his friend in the eyes. “Shit, I don’t know what to say. I’m not… I’m not gay.”

“Neither am I,” Ville said quietly and broke eye contact. “I have never felt like this… not before you.”

Bam felt so many different things in that moment, and it was hard to comprehend that it was not just a dream but reality. He closed his eyes and tried to think rationally. Then he felt a hand around his, and his eyes snapped open. Ville was white as a sheet; his eyes were red-rimmed and brimming over with tears.

“Willa,” Bam said quietly. “I… I have a girlfriend.”

Ville nodded and withdrew his hand. For a few seconds, he remained silent, the tears and snot still running down his face. “O-of course,” he whispered, his expression blank. Bam had never been intimidated by tears before, but Ville’s tears made his chest tighten with anxiety. His Willa, strong and capable, should not be crying.

“Please,” Bam said pleadingly. “Please, don’t cry.”

Ville nodded slowly and pulled himself together to the extent it was possible, though he did not dare to meet Bam’s eyes. He was afraid of what he would find.

“You can take the car and drive back to town once you’ve sobered up,” he suggested with his eyes fixed on the cabin, his voice raw and cracked. Bam shivered. In all the time he had known Ville, his voice had never been anything but dark and firm, and to hear it break made his stomach roll.

The skater said nothing; his thoughts were a tangled mess. He tried his best to understand what was happening; however, making sense of the nonsensical was impossible. Their many years of friendship flashed before his mind’s eye, all the intimate moments they had shared, and he felt as though he had been cheated. Even so, his anger was non-existent. Ville looked completely lost. All Bam could really do was nod in silent agreement, and the two of them somehow managed to wander back to the cabin without another word said between them.

As Bam closed the door to the guest bedroom, he caught a haunting glimpse of Ville in the hallway. The look on his face had been that of despair verging on madness, and his green eyes had searched his, undoubtedly waiting for words of repair. Bam suddenly felt nauseous; he felt guilty. Could there
ever be such words?

The blue-eyed man turned the key. When he heard the lock click, he felt himself dissolve. His legs caved in, and he did not make it to the bed, he merely fell into a heap of limbs on the floor. The tears that came were noisy and drained him of all energy, and in the end, all he could feel was hollowness. His exhaustion had caught up with him and numbed the myriad of raw and unprocessed emotions. But the numbness quickly gave way for full-blown panic. The thought of losing Ville, one of his dearest friends, knocked the air from his lungs. He felt like shouting.

“No-no-no,” he whispered to himself. “Walo, why are you doing this to me, fucking cunt…”

Bam managed to drag himself toward the night table where he had left his cellphone, and he dialed the only number he could think of, the only number he knew by heart.

“… Hello?” a groggy voice answered after a couple of rings.

“Oh fuck, it’s like in the middle of the night over there, right?”

“Uh, yeah. Bam, can it wait? I’m so fucking tired-”

“I really, really need to talk. It’s… it’s important,” he said, his voice tearing at the end of the sentence. Ryan fell silent.

“But are you safe?”

“… Yeah, I’m at… I’m at Ville’s cabin, like I-I told you… he… he…”

“Did something happen to him?” Ryan asked, and Bam realized he had made it sound like the world was about to end. He drew in a shaky breath, and he tried to pull himself together like the grown man he was, but his reality had been thoroughly rattled.

“He told me… he told me that he… I don’t even fucking know, he told me he’s into me,” he whispered, dearly hoping that Ville was not listening in on the conversation. “I just… what the hell…”

Bam could hear Ryan sighing a breath of relief, and then he gave a nervous kind of laugh that somehow managed to soothe Bam’s nerves. “Okay, first of all, thank God! You made it sound like someone had fucking died! Oh, for fuck’s sake Bam… grow a pair, will you!”

“… I… what?”

Ryan sighed again, but this time he sounded more annoyed than relieved. “Okay, you know what, I’ve chosen to not comment on this, but… you’ve had the most obvious guy crush on him, and I didn’t know what the hell would happen between the two of you, but you followed him around like a love-struck puppy for years, Bam! Are you really that fucking surprised?”

“B-but you were the one who told me to-”

“To not let him drag you into some homosexual shit, blah-blah, I know, and I’m sorry for ever having said that, but I was worried sick. You were stalking the guy! I just prayed he wouldn’t take advantage of you when you were that young and clueless…”

He paused for a really long time there, and Bam could quite vividly picture him sitting upright in bed, pinching the bridge his nose while Angie, his girlfriend, stared at him in wide-eyed surprise. “But then I got to know him, and everyone got to know him, and we all came around. Ville’s one of the
kindest and most genuine people I know…” Ryan paused for another slow second, and then he asked, “How the fuck did you react?”

“I…”

“He’s probably half-dying right now,” Ryan sighed. Annoyance coated his every word, and Bam was beginning to feel increasingly more uneasy by the second. “Why the fuck are you even on the phone with me?”

The question squeezed the air from Bam’s lungs. Alarm bells were going off inside his head, and he felt sick to his stomach.

“I-I…” he eventually stuttered. “I don’t know,” he whimpered, and his heart was pounding in his chest like it was about to explode. He felt as though he were the worst piece of shit to have ever been born. What decent human being dismissed their friend’s tearful admittance and left them to their own personal hell? A peculiar thought then emerged from the depths of his subconscious mind. Had he, by dismissing Ville’s declaration of love, dismissed his own feelings? Over the years, Bam had grown accustomed to dealing with rumors and accusations regarding their friendship. He had grown equally accustomed to either denying or ignoring all the false things people said about them. Was it possible that he had built a wall between them in the process?

As realization dawned on him, he frowned deeply. He had to bite his lower lip to keep himself from sobbing out loud.

“… Look, Bam,” Ryan said and then chuckled. “This is silly. D’you like him or not? I sure as hell can’t help you with that, but… well, I know that you’ve had several girlfriends over the years, and… well, you’ve never been bothered with keeping them around - you just needed someone there. Are you sure that you’re not just, I don’t know, hiring girlfriends to forget about… well, about him?”

“… I-I’ve never… never thought about it… n-not like that.”

Ryan exhaled sharply. “You need to seriously think about this, Bam. You need to think about it and make an adult decision for once in your life. You’ve been dancing around him for years. I’ve never seen you so obsessed with anyone or anything to that extent before, not even skateboarding… So, you’ve got to ask yourself a few things… like, what the hell inspired you to get matching heartagram tattoos? Or why you treat him like he’s the fucking pope. You have to really fucking think about that, Bam.”

“… Yeah, I’ll… I’ll try.”

Dunn hung up on him. When silence once again filled the room, Bam began to bawl unbearably as he tried to make sense of the nonsensical. Was Dunn right?

He remembered the day he had first seen Ville Valo. It had been his first trip to Europe; the flight had seemed hellishly long and boring. Dunn had shoved that magazine into his hands before falling asleep, and Bam had skimmed through dull articles about irrelevant topics, but then he had come to the last page. The article featured HIM, a band that was still well under the radar, and Bam had been drawn in. If he were to be honest, it was the photograph of Ville that had caught his attention; the face he had not been able to forget. He had ripped the page from the magazine and stuffed it in his pocket, though he had not understood what had possessed him to do it.

Memories of him and Ville flooded his mind. The first HIM song he had heard, the first concert, the first time he had met up with the band and the first time he had truly spoken to Ville. An invisible line had been created between them – a bond – and from that moment on, they had shared
everything; they had shared a vision.

If Bam were to be really honest, he would say that the most meaningful thing he had done with his life was to promote HIM and help them get famous in the US. His heart swelled with pride at the mere thought, and he loved the band and their music to the very core of his being. Ville had always made sense of the tangled mess that was Bam’s life. He had always put so much faith in him. Even when everyone around him had felt that he was just a hopeless kid, Ville had been there to encourage him.

He remembered all the perfect smiles Ville had reserved for him, and he remembered the songs he had sung and the secrets he had shared. And furthermore, Bam remembered the times he had watched Ville sleep. Ville had slept everywhere – in his bed, on the couch, on the floor – the list went on and on, and Bam had always been close by. He had wanted to keep the Finn safe, and whenever they had been apart, Bam had felt concerned. While the feeling had been completely unfounded, he had always told himself that Ville could be an arrogant prick. As a result, he had always been dogged by problem after problem. The real issue was that most of Bam’s friends were troublemakers, and he had never been the least bit concerned about their wellbeing. Why was Ville different?

As Bam thought even more deeply about what Ryan had told him, another question came to mind: why had he done all those things for Ville? The answer was simple – Bam adored Ville – and it did not hurt his pride to admit that he loved both Ville and the band, but the protectiveness he felt around the singer, the admiration and the fascination he felt, that was something else. It was something he could not explain away, not even to himself.

Bam hit himself over the head, annoyed with himself for having been so blind. The fear of being perceived as gay and of losing Ville had haunted him to the level where he had suppressed his feelings altogether. It had, however, not suppressed the painful yearning he felt when Ville was not with him; when Ville was on the other side of the earth. And that was where the stream of random girlfriends had entered the picture.

At this point, Bam felt overwhelmed by all that he had found hidden within himself. He wondered when all the half-truths, part-truths and non-truths had gained control over his life, but he knew the answer. At the beginning of their friendship, Bam had been in awe. The Finn had been such an impressive person, and Bam, too young to recognize his own infatuation, had suppressed his feelings. Ryan’s words had been a cold shower though. He had always treated Ville with the utmost respect, and no request had been too demanding. Bam would have gone to hell and back again for him.

He knew he had to talk to Ville, but he felt too exhausted to move. He decided to close his eyes for just half a second, but of course, half a second is never just half a second. The sandman came for him then, and Bam immediately fell asleep with his back pressed against the wall.
Moving on from Moving on

Chapter Notes

It's been forever since I updated this. Sorry. I've had rough month. I've finished the story and the chapters will be posted once a week from now on, if my health allows it.

All comments are appreciated <3

00:19 a.m.         06.07.2006

As Bam’s eyes opened, his limbs flexed in shock. Everything was blurry. The world was oddly dark, and his head felt heavy, almost as if someone had hit him with a shovel. Moreover, his eyelids felt thick and swollen, and a dull pain came from behind his eyes and spread all the way up to his forehead. The skin of his face felt too tight and too warm; his limbs were stiff and sore. As he tried to straighten his back, a sharp pain in his neck caused him to groan. His hand flew to the spot that ached, and he rubbed it vigorously.

“… What the fuck,” he muttered to himself once he realized that he lay sprawled out on the cold floor, and then it hit him. A sudden wave of memories flooded back into his mind, and his eyes grew wide in outright horror.

Ville.

“Fuck,” he muttered to himself as he scrambled to his feet. His limbs felt stiff and jelly-like at the same time, and he soon realized that he was dizzy from both dehydration and sleepiness. His body screamed for him to surrender to the bed that awaited him in the corner of the room, but his mind told him that someone he loved needed him. He had to be courageous, and he had to face the emotions he had ignored for so long. It would be difficult, but easier than to pretend for another day.

His cellphone beeped, stealing his attention, and he looked at the screen and saw that Ryan had sent him numerous text messages. The most recent one said: “You're Bam Margera. You can do whatever the fuck you want. Take care of yourself and of Ville. Love you, man.”

Bam smiled tenderly, touched by the message. He did not respond because he knew that Ryan did not anticipate an answer from him, not yet anyhow. Someone else needed an answer from him first, and that someone had waited long enough. Bam sank his teeth into the soft flesh of his cheeks; he realized that Ville had gone through hell while Bam had been snoring. He cursed himself – angry with himself for his own selfishness – and scrambled to his feet.

“… Alright then,” the skater whispered to himself and unlocked the door. He hesitated for a moment, but not because he did not know what he wanted; he hesitated because he did not know how Ville would react, and he did not know how the be the adult. Ville had always inspired him and guided him as a role model, and Ville had always been the mentally strong one – the one capable of rational decision-making. Their roles had now been switched, and Bam had to live up to that pressure. He was scared that he would make an even bigger mess of things, but then again, he did not like the alternative.

He tiptoed toward Ville’s bedroom and found that the Finn had left the door ajar, for which he was
grateful. It meant that Ville wanted to talk. At the very least, it meant that he did not want to shut him out completely. Bam knew he had not handled things gracefully at the lake, but the admittance had blindsided him to a point where his brain had stopped working altogether.

“… Willa?” he said quietly and stepped inside of the room. “You up?”

At first, he saw nothing, but then his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He first noticed the porcelain flesh of Ville’s exposed back, nearly blue in shade under the faint light of the moon. He looked otherworldly, more so than usual, and Bam let out a shaky breath and raked his fingers through his curls. A most peculiar sense of dread and wonderment filled his heart, and he truly had to brace himself. Bam, who had always been a jackass at heart, had never before felt all his arrogance and confidence crumble into fright. The four steps to the bed suddenly seemed like an impossible distance. He walked it nonetheless, though his heart felt like it would implode at any given moment.

“… Are you awake?” he asked in a hushed voice, but the singer did not respond. Bam noticed that his breathing was shallow, and he was clearly not asleep. Bam did, however, understand why Ville chose to remain silent. Rejection was never pretty, and Bam had rejected him. Following the telephone conversation with Ryan, the American had understood something crucial about his friendship with Ville. It was one of the most meaningful and influential relationships of his life, and he berated himself for having acted so immaturely. After all their years as close friends, Ville deserved better.

Without another word said, Bam lay down next to the man he had spent so many years admiring from afar. He wrapped one arm around his waist and waited for a response, but the Finn remained silent.

“I’m sorry,” Bam apologized. He buried his face in the crook of the older man’s neck and took in the scent of his hair – cheap apple shampoo and the faint smell of cigarettes – and he felt at peace. But the feeling did not last for more than a couple of seconds. He suddenly felt the older man trembling in his arms, and he knew that Ville was afraid; he was scared that Bam had come to bid him farewell.

“Willa, I’m here now,” he whispered soothingly. “Please…” he faltered, and then he cleverly remembered that he probably should not ask him not to cry, not when his heart had been shattered and Bam was to blame. “Please talk to me, love…”

Love.

Ville turned around to face him, and Bam saw that his eyes were red and swollen. Ripe tears were still streaming down his beautiful face. “I did that,” Bam acknowledged in a low voice; he then wiped away the salty drops one by one. “I’m so sorry, love. I’m such a jerk…” he sighed remorsefully. “Oh, Willa. Can you forgive me for being so fucking unworthy of you? ‘Cause I am on every level imaginable.”

The older man had to smile at the heartfelt apology, but then he fell apart once more. Fresh tears shimmered in his eyes; a wretched sob fell from his lips. Bam was there to pick him up though, and he had no intentions of going anywhere. Not this time, and not ever again.

“I… earlier today, I was so shocked,” he murmured ashamedly. “And… I’m sorry, but I called Ryan… He talked some sense into me. He said that… well, basically that I’m a fucking moron, but we all knew that anyway. Um…”

Bam had to give a nervous laugh because his stomach was all in knots, and because his heart was beating too rapidly, causing him to feel dizzy. “I’ve been obsessed with you…” he said quietly,
“with the band too, of course, but… did you know that the first time I heard about you guys was on the plane to Helsinki in May, 2000?” He paused and watched the older man’s face for a reaction. “There was a small article about you in one of those airline magazines… I saw your face, and the entire world stopped spinning… I ripped out the page, and… I kind of kept it.”

Ville started laughing at the embarrassing admittance. It was a rich and deep kind of laughter, the kind that made Bam feel as though he was floating on pink clouds. “Really, Bam?” he whispered, his voice raw from all the tears, but the humor was not lost on him.

“I’m not saying that I’m proud,” Bam chuckled in spite of the fat tears that had rolled down his face. “But yeah… And then the very same day, I bought ‘Razorblade Romance’ and forced Dunn to listen to it in complete fucking silence. He was so pissed!”

Ville allowed for another genuine laugh to slip through his lips, though his voice still bled and his face was still shining with wetness. He let out a sigh and gazed into Bam’s pale blue eyes. “Bam…” he croaked. “I do of course find this very amusing, but… do you mean to say that-”

Bam put his hand on Ville’s cheek, causing him to fall silent, and he smiled a sad little smile that was severely uncharacteristic for Bam Margera, “I’m saying that I’m an asshole… and that I really, really love you… In fact, I fucking worship you,” he whispered. “… I’m in love with you.”

He felt Ville’s breath against his face – cigarettes and peppermint – and he saw the tears that glimmered in his eyes. But even so, relief was written all over his face, and he was no longer sobbing.

“I love you too, you little shit.” Ville eventually said, and then he moved even closer. Their noses bumped together, and Bam smiled that huge smile of his. Ville giggled as he leaned closer, so close that their foreheads were touching; their limbs were a tangled mess. Both men closed their eyes then. Their breaths were shaky, and they both trembled a little.

 “… Thank you,” Bam whispered after a few moments of nothing.

“For what?”

“For being Willa Walo.” Bam’s voice quavered, and he ran his hand through Ville’s unkempt hair and felt more wetness burning in his own eyes. They were happy tears.

“Oh, Bammie…”

Ville closed the gap between them, their noses bumping together. He laughed softly before pressing a tender kiss to the younger man’s lips. Bam kissed back, surprised and yet not truly surprised to find that Ville’s lips were like silk. He giggled at the thought, and Ville giggled because Bam was giggling.

“Idiot,” the Finn said and pulled the younger man in for another kiss. As their lips brushed together for a second time, the world stood perfectly still. Ville thought that for the first time in an eternity, his mind was locked into the present. Bam did not think about anything but the kiss and the man he was kissing. The caress of Ville’s lips was softer and warmer than Bam could have ever imagined. He opened his mouth and let out a low moan that made the older man shiver.

The kiss ended. Ville smiled against Bam’s mouth, delirious with both disbelief and ecstasy. This was a dream he had not dared to dip into before, not even in his wildest imagination, and he held on to Bam for dear life. He never wanted to let go of him again.

“You’re beautiful, Bammie,” he breathed against the younger man’s face once they parted.
Bam laughed. “Me? Nah,” he said and smiled sheepishly. “You are.”

Ville was swift to reclaim Bam’s mouth. He stroked his tongue against Bam’s lip, silently pleading for entry. Bam opened his mouth without thinking twice about it. The soft strokes of Ville’s tongue against his felt intoxicating – a maddening dance that quickened their heartbeats and reddened their cheeks. Ville fed from the sweetness of Bam’s mouth and relished the taste of him, so different from any woman he had ever kissed. He was rough and playful, though he was tender and sweet at the same time. The feeling was foreign – nothing like the women he had been with before – and he felt giddy with excitement, endorphins, and joy.

Ville deepened the kiss and immersed himself in the younger man’s warmth. It was a long, drugging kiss that neither of them wanted to end. Bam reluctantly removed his lips from Ville, out of breath, and closed his eyes for a moment. When they blinked open again, the Finn stared back, his green eyes calm.

Bam’s breathed heavily. “… Woah,” he panted and let out a small chuckle. “Woah,” he repeated, and he placed his hand on Ville’s chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart. It comforted him.

“… Bammie,” he whispered lovingly and brushed his thumb over Bam’s cheek, reveling in the emotions that made him feel alive. “Olet kaunis.”

Bam grunted. “I don’t know what the hell that means, Walo,” he said, his hands wandering down Ville’s back. “But I’m sure I agree.”

“Oh, I’m sure you do.”

The older man smiled and pressed his face against the crook of Bam’s neck, breathing him in. He smelt like sweat and muddy water from the lake, but then something else, something that was entirely Bam. It was a rich scent that somehow reminded him of the smell that always came after the rain had fallen. He felt a little sad to realize that he himself most likely smelled like cigarettes and alcohol, and then that aftershave Jonna had bought him.

“… Willa?”

“Mm?”

“You taste good.”

Ville grinned. “You smell good.”

They simply lay there for a few minutes, breathing heavily and thinking about all that had occurred within the last twenty-four hours. Some thoughts were sad. They both had girlfriends waiting for them, and both of them lived their lives under public scrutiny. To top it off, neither of them was gay. In fact, they were not quite sure about what everything meant, but maybe they did not need to know. Maybe it would solve itself.

“I love you,” Bam said. “So fucking much.”

“I love you too, Bammie,” the frontman mumbled against Bam’s shoulder. He let one curious hand wander down the toned chest, feeling slightly embarrassed as he explored what had long been considered forbidden fruit. Bam giggled; he was extremely ticklish. Ville had to laugh a little himself, amused by Bam’s childishness. He had a charming boyishness to him, which was refreshing to someone like Ville. He always encountered arrogant people who took themselves way too seriously – people who considered themselves to be the center of the universe. That was the music industry, and while Ville did his best to keep a distance and withstand the pressure, he sometimes became
consumed by it.

“So… can I ask you something weird?”

“Sure, Bam?”

“Have you… I know what you said before, but…” He paused and bit his lip, feeling somewhat reluctant to present him with the silly question that had lingered on his mind for years. “Have you ever been with another guy before?”

Ville hummed and suppressed the urge to laugh. He knew that Bam was curious by nature.

“I’ve slept with guys,” he admitted, and then he grimaced, a little disgusted with himself. “I was young once… and in Europe, people are generally more accepting of casual sex, even between men… you know, experimenting.”

“You’re still young,” Bam snorted. “And… uh, this is kind of weird for me to say, but I guess I really thought you were bisexual. I’ve always… gotten that vibe? Jeez, I sound judgmental.”

Ville laughed again, not the least bit offended. “I’ve always felt as though Americans feel the need to put a label on everything to create a distance from ‘us, the normal ones’ and ‘them, the weirdos’… I guess that’s the case with people like Bowie, or Freddie Mercury, and it isn’t wrong. But I was raised in a family where nothing was considered too taboo to discuss openly. I hardly think April would have opened a sex shop and let you work in it,” he commented, referring to his father and his sex shop, and then he laughed at his own joke.

Bam was both amused and mortified at the mental images that came to mind. “Oh man, can you imagine Ape’s face if I told her you just said that?”

“… Yeah. Let’s not tell her,” the Finn whispered and then yawned into his hand. “I want her to like me.”

“She already adores you,” Bam said and gave a quiet chuckle. “I mean, in comparison to Novak, you’re like a saint or something.”

Ville smiled, and then he yawned for a second time. Bam started caressing his back in a soothing manner. He knew Ville was tired.

“… Mm, Bammie… I’ll fall asleep if you do that…”

“Then sleep, Willa.”

“… Mm.”

Bam held him closer as he slowly began drifting off to sleep. Soon almost inaudible snores filled the silence of the bedroom. When the skater knew that Ville had entered a deep sleep, he closed his own eyes and fell asleep within a couple of seconds. His dreams had never been sweeter, and yet they could not compare to their new reality.

21:25 p.m. 26.01.2017

Outside, the world was still clad in white, though the golden glare of the rising sun enlivened the monotone winter landscape, making the snow shimmer with golden hues. Bam sat in his study and
kept an eye on the driveway, aware that Nikki was on her way back home. A couple of minutes earlier, he had booked a flight to Spain. He had not consulted her. He had, in fact, purposely failed to mention it to her, and he would be in Europe for months. The fact that he had made such a life-altering decision without involving Nikki said a lot about their marriage. An argument awaited him, an argument that could only end in tears, but after the hellish weeks he had gone through, he welcomed it. He needed change – and for the better. So did Nikki.

Together, they would never find what they were looking for. She was still young enough to find a good guy – one who wanted to live in a family-friendly neighborhood and have five kiddies – and he could continue to pine for ghosts. But at least he had his career to focus on.

Spain. A stupid smile crept onto his face. When he had first stepped on the scale last year and had noticed that he was more than three hundred pounds, he had first assumed that he would go down the same road as his father, who was so fat he could no longer walk up and down the stairs. Then there was the risk of diabetes, not to mention heart disease. The blow had rattled him, but he had kept on stuffing his face like the pig he was. Then there was the alcohol. Only after rehab had he managed to take action, and by cutting out the alcohol and the emotional eating, he had shed the pounds in a matter of months. Now he was fit enough to go to Spain – to rediscover his first love in life – and the happiness he felt was addictive. It was a rebirth of sorts.

Going back to his career as a TV persona was something he was more unsure about. Back in his early twenties, he had willingly signed a contract that would put his personal life on full display, and in the end, it had backfired. At the height of his career, everyone had adored him. He had been royalty. Now he was a washed up comedian and sportsman, and most of his ‘fans’ claimed to be disgusted by him. The ‘pity party’ he had thrown himself after Ryan’s death was to blame, but then again, why should strangers feel so entitled to witnessing his every move? To criticize his reaction to his best friend’s death?

To them, they had never been real people. They were just people on TV – people they assumed they knew everything about.

Bam sighed. He had been too young when he had signed that contract with MTV. Now he had the experience to manipulate the situation to his liking, but back then? Man, he had been devoured by the TV viewers’ insatiable appetite – and the fame. The sudden waterfall of money that had poured down on him. In the end, it had killed Ryan. Success was so dangerous because at one point or another, you have fulfilled all your dreams and you are so utterly devoid of your humanity – your morality – you just cease to want anything but hedonistic sedatives such as alcohol, fast cars and sex. You are a God, and then you are dead. In the end, you are so bored you drink and drive, and you are so reckless you veer off the road and hit a fucking tree. Your immortality ends there, in a flaming inferno.

The red Mercedes pulled into the driveway, effectively breaking his chain of thoughts. Nikki stepped out onto the slippery ice and nearly fell, but she grabbed a hold of the car door and managed to steady herself. Their eyes met briefly through the window, and she smiled.

Not even a minute later, Nikki stood in the doorway, still attired in her green winter coat, thick-soled boots and leather gloves. The dark locks of hair framed her face beautifully, forming a stark contrast to her milky skin. One could, however, tell that she had been out in the cold, her cheeks tinted with a pinkish hue. Now that she was so thin, her cheekbones were even more prominent than before, and her already lithe frame seemed almost boyish underneath the coat that was at least two sizes too large. As Bam took in the sight of her, his mouth went dry and he nearly choked on a lungful of air. How had he not noticed this? She could have been Ville’s sister.
“… Are you going away?”

Bam frowned. “Huh?”

She nodded at the screen and the confirmation e-mail he had received from the airline. He combed his fingers through his short, graying hair and offered her a sparse, “Yeah,” before averting his eyes.

“You’re going to Spain?”

“Yeah, I…” He tried swallowing the lump in his throat but failed. “Element… they renewed my contract.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, her smile widening into a toothy grin. “I’m so happy for you, honey – I knew – I just knew you’d make it. You’ll be making some videos?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Joey wants a film on my return to skateboarding.”

“Am I coming with?” she asked, giddy with excitement, and it was as if her happiness erased the tired lines from her face. She seemed so youthful, almost like the girl he had loved, and it made him feel even worse. Had it not been for him – for the burden of caring for him and his self-imposed suffering – she would have still been that girl. Why had he dragged her into this? And even more baffling: Why had she, such a brilliant business woman back then, decided to marry his sorry ass?

“Nikki.” There was a long, awkward pause as her smile faded. Bam drew in a sharp breath, willing his eyes to meet her confused stare, and his voice was grave as he said, “We need to talk.”

Those were not the words she had expected to hear, and a panicked expression flitted across her beautiful features, though she pulled herself together and appeared relatively unfazed. He, of course, knew that Nikki was anxious. Her expression was calm, but her posture was anything but. She looked as though carved from wood, stiff as a log, and her eyes clouded over. Bam, ill at ease, resumed to staring out the window.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice even but low-pitched. When he said nothing, his eyes glued to the window and the frozen landscape, her stomach went tight with knots. “Bam – look at me,” she pleaded, her voice small. “Have I done something?”

Bam shook his head and turned to look at her worried face. He said, “Maybe you should sit down,” and her face fell like the Bastille. He regretted the request the moment he had uttered it, aware that it sounded as if someone had died, and he was quick to add, “No one’s hurt or anything. I just… I want you to sit down and talk to me for a moment.”

“Alright, Bam.”

She removed her thick coat and went to sit down in one of the two armchairs in front of the desk. Her skin was so pale it seemed transparent. Again, he was struck by how much she looked like the Finn. She was rounder around the edges, was quite short and had a wider nose, but other than that, she bore a striking resemblance to him.

“… Are you happy?” he heard himself asking, already straying from the little manuscript he had prepared inside his head. Nikki looked stunned and said nothing, she just nibbled on her lower lip, her eyes filling with tears.

“How can you ask me that?”
Bam drew in a sharp breath, confused. “What do you mean?”

She hugged herself with her arms, her eyes drawn to the window. Every day was a battle, and she sometimes lost and stayed in bed, unable to move. The grief was crippling. She cried every time she stepped into the shower, every time she saw the empty crib in the nursery and every time she felt the flatness of her belly. A couple of months ago, everything had seemed to fall into place. Bam had shed the weight, sobered up – and dang, she had gotten pregnant! They had tried for years. Oh, she had never dared to hope that such happiness could be hers, and no one had been more grateful than her, always talking to baby Ryan, assuring him that she would always be there for him. The rug had been pulled from under her. Everything had fallen apart.

“Of course I’m not happy.” She dug her fingernails into the cushioned arms of the chair and held his gaze for a long moment. Then, as she averted her eyes, she admitted, “I haven’t been happy since that night, Bam.” Her grip on the chair loosened again. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“… Me neither,” he said, and the guilt was like being slowly crushed under a boulder.

“Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

He shot her a nervous glance. “No.”

“I thought so,” she whispered, wiping the tears from her eyes. “I-I know it hasn’t been easy, Bam. I’ve felt this coming for some time now…” She rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands, hating it when others saw her vulnerable, even her husband. “You’ve… you’ve been acting so different. You’ve changed.”

“… I’m sorry,” he said, his mind going blank. “I’m so sorry, Nikki.”

“But you know what? You’ve done it once already, Bam,” she said, trying her best to sound cheery. “I’ll be there every step of the way – even if you’re in Spain.” She smiled weakly. “Hell, I can rent a nice beach house nearby and-”

“Nikki,” he interrupted, frowning. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I-I assumed you’re going back to rehab?” Her eyes grew wide. “Wait, what the hell is going on?”

He bit down on his lip and started drumming his fingers on the table, not knowing how to break the news. When he eventually lifted his gaze and took in the sight of her, tearful and fearful – and utterly bewildered, he had to ask himself what would be best for her. She had already given so much for nothing.

“I’m sober, Nikki,” he informed her in a quiet voice. “I’m sober, but I feel like a piece of shit anyways.” He gave a pained laugh, running his fingers through his
short hair. “She took one long look at me and just picked me apart – didn’t take her more than twenty minutes.”

“Dr. Adler?”

“Yeah.”

“What did she say?”

It occurred to him that he could not be completely honest with her. She would never understand.

“… The shitstorm we’ve gone through,” he began, his mouth feeling as if stuffed with cotton, “is the kind of shit that will either glue two people together – or tear them apart.” He noticed the fresh tears that streaked down her cheeks, her face red and blotchy. “And I…” He swallowed thickly, struggling to properly articulate his feelings. “I think we’ve lost whatever it was that held us together. We just tried so hard… Every step of the goddamn way, we tried to make this shitty thing work – and I was an asshole to you, always drunk, and then the – the baby…” He had to stop for a moment, drawing in a sharp breath. “And, fuck, it all went to hell, and you’re miserable and I’m miserable, and nothing’s getting better.”

“W-what do you…” She coughed to clear the rasp from her voice. “What do you mean, Bam? Do you want us to… to split up?”

He drew in a sharp breath and said, “I don’t think we’ve got much of a choice.”

Her breath audibly hitched in her throat, and she choked out, “Bam,” with a pleading look on her face.

“You can stay here for as long as you want,” he assured her. “I’m going to Spain for a few months, like I said before, I really didn’t lie about the contract with Element.”

Shell-shocked, all she could do was sit there and stare, unsure if this was actually happening or not. To her, who had sacrificed everything for Bam, the concept of him breaking up with her was incomprehensible. A mere month ago, she had been pregnant with their child, and now? Now he wanted to kick her to the curb. How was that possible? If he was indeed sober, what else could spark such a sudden change of heart? Was it another woman? The thought had her boiling with fury, her nails cutting into the palm of her hands. As if struck by lightning, she jumped up from the couch and walked over to the desk, her eyes flaying him.

“Who is it?” she demanded, their faces only inches apart. “Who is it?”

“What the hell-”

“Were you seeing some slut all this time?” she whispered, more to herself than to him. “It’s that girl – Julia – from the bar, isn’t it?” That girl had never been able to keep her eyes to herself – and Bam had liked her. The way they had chit-chatted about mindless topics, everything from fast cars to beer, and Nikki had felt left out, sipping at her cava. Just thinking about the two of them together, the feeling of betrayal sliced through her heart like a cleaver.

“It’s her,” she claimed. “I know it’s her!”

“What? No!” Bam looked shocked. “You’re out of your mind.”

“Nikki,” he said hoarsely, and the way he said her name made her straighten up, something dark entering her eyes. “I haven’t been cheating, alright?”

“… Is this another one of your sick pranks then?” Her eyes were closed, almost as if she was in violent prayer. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Nikki,” he said again, sounding desperate. “Don’t be stupid.”

Her lower lip started trembling. She brought her right hand up to her face and started rubbing her eyes, hating the tears that blurred her vision. Bam walked around the desk and put his arms around her, holding her close, and she cried bitterly, her hands tugging at his clothes, wanting to absorb him into her skin, but he was already far gone. And she felt it. She felt how stiff he was, unsure of what to do with himself, and she understood now that the nagging voice in the back of her head had been right. After the miscarriage, everything had been bleak and empty, and she had made up these excuses for his behavior, but no, he had wanted to get a divorce.

“I know it’s a girl,” she whispered, her voice raw. “I’m not stupid.”

“No, you’re wrong. Dead wrong.”

The hug ended. Bam saw the anguished expression on her face and wanted to take back the words, but that would be another kind of madness altogether. No, he had to be firm.

“… A month ago-”

“I’ve felt this way since I stopped drinking,” Bam blurted out, cutting her short. “I-I didn’t really understand it until I saw Dr. Adler – but now I know. And I swear, I haven’t slept with anyone else.”

At that, she jerked away. As she stood there in complete silence, studying his face, she thought about the last year of their marital life – about the AA meetings, the therapy sessions and, of course, the pregnancy. She had shared all these ups and downs with him, with this man before her, yet she found that she could not recognize him. The man she had lived with, accepted and adored, he was not in this room. Before her stood a stranger.

“You…” she breathed, her heart beating so fast it made her dizzy. Bam just stood there, his eyes full of pity – and hell, she absolutely did not want his pity. Boiling with rage, she bit down hard on him with her gaze. “You knew, and you didn’t tell me?” When he lowered his eyes and gave a curt nod of his head, she grimaced.

“Wow, Bam,” she croaked before drying away tears with the back of her hand. “You must be the most selfish person I’ve ever met.”

“I’m a selfish bastard,” he said in agreement. “And you’ve sacrificed so much… too much – for me. I’m really fucking sorry-”

“Don’t you dare!”

There was a loud smack, that of skin touching skin, and a sudden impact sent him sprawling on all fours. His cheek ached. Nikki, still standing, watched her clenched fist with a surprised look on her face, and once her eyes landed on her husband who was sat on the floor, she let out a terrified gasp, unsure what had just happened. Had she hit him? She had. Her hand hurt; Bam’s cheek bloomed red, and the expression on his face mirrored her own. She whimpered. In all their years together, they had never been violent to one another. Now she had hit him.

“… It’s okay,” he said quickly, marveling at her strength.
“Oh my God,” she whispered, tears and snot running down her face. “Bam, I-”

“No, don’t think about it.” The skater shook his head. “I deserved that. After all I’ve done to you – I deserved that.” He bowed his head, his hand cradling his cheek. If he could have done it to himself, he would have. He had taken advantage of her, and now she sent her into the great unknown, only because he could not keep up appearances. When their eyes met, he said, “I mean, I never should’ve proposed to you in the first place – it was never real.”

She looked as though someone had run her over with a tractor. For a couple of unnervingly slow seconds, she simply stood there with her lips slightly parted – stunned – and gawked at him.

“You’re a fucking monster,” she eventually whispered, and then she clamped a hand over her mouth to stifle the sobs tearing their way loose, but to no avail. She choked out ugly, gasping sobs, and Bam, badly shaken that she had dubbed him a ‘monster’, scrambled to his feet. When he tried to take her hand, wanting to comfort her, she jumped back like a skittish cat. The look in her eyes was haunted, and he could hardly berate her for that. He had, after all, betrayed her.

“Nikki.” He took a step closer.

“Don’t touch me,” she said in distinctly spaced words, glaring at the offered hand as if it was an abomination. “Just don’t.”

“Sorry,” he whispered, his hand falling limp at his side. “Sorry.”

She gritted her teeth for control, her anger suddenly flaring up. After a couple of weeks of passive-aggressive behaviors and remarks, she was fed up. It occurred to her that she no longer had to take his bullshit, and she was as relieved as she was upset. Their marriage had suffered, but she had soldiered on. She had told herself, ‘the end justifies the means’, and during the worst of times, when Bam had behaved like an errant child, she had been patient and loving. It had all been for nothing.

“It was never real?”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. The fact that he had violated the term ‘I love you’ time and time again was a heavy burden on his shoulders.

“No.” He sighed. “Wasn’t for me anyhow.”

She stifled her sobs the best she could, her slender frame shaking as she hugged herself. “Why the fuck would you lure me in like that?” she demanded, bitterness dripping from her voice. “Do you even know how fucked up that is?”

The skater nodded. If anything, he was guilty of having pulled her into a horrible situation. It was unforgivable.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

“No!” she exploded. “No – you’re not!”

Silence. Bam bit down on his lower lip and stared out the window. The sun, so bright and so beautiful, felt displaced.

“… I-I,” the brunette stuttered, almost choking on the foul words that danced on the tip of her tongue. But she thought better of it and said, “I’m leaving.”

“Alright.”
At that one, confirmative word, her eyes darkened. How could he be so detached? They had been together every single day for the last five years, and now he acted as if she had been a stage prop all along, something replaceable. Just like that, their marriage was reduced to nothing, and the memories – the wedding, the vacations, their baby – they were reduced to nothing. Everything she had given – nothing.

“You’ll hear from my lawyer,” she informed him, her voice strangely confident. “Just because you’re Bam Margera, you can’t take advantage of people – can’t treat them like garbage! And trust me, I’m not some weak little slut.”

“You’ll get your money,” he said, so tired of his living situation, he would have gladly parted with his pinkie toe if it would make her go away. “Anything you want, Nikki.”

“Such magnanimity,” she spat out through gritted teeth. But the anger melted away; her shoulders sagged, and when their eyes met for the briefest of moments, he saw fresh tears in them. He temporarily regretted his decision to leave her, and he wished he could have kept on pretending for her sake, but then again, they would just end up sleeping in separate rooms, despising each other, and their kid, should they ever have one, would be stuck in the middle, hating them both for their loveless marriage.

“Bye, Bam,” she said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ll pack all my belongings once you’re in Spain. I… I need some time.”

“Yeah, sure.” He handed her the oversized jacket she would have otherwise forgotten. “Bye, Nikki.”

The brunette bit down on her lower lip and put the jacket back on. Her hand landed on the door knob, and she paused. The whole world seemed to be moving in slow motion; it was like being stuck in a nightmare. This was her home – had been her home for years – and she had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. But knowing what her husband was capable of, she knew that it had never been her home at all, only a place where she had existed.

“Bye, Bam,” she said again, and her voice broke.

“Nikki.”

She did not slam the door shut; she was painstakingly gentle. And when her car had left the driveway, it was as if she had never been there at all. The house had not sensed her presence, and Nikki, his wife of almost four years, had no ghost of her own. The house was supposed to be empty, and yet he felt a pair of green eyes on him, and he murmured, “You’re loving this, aren’t you?” with a tired, defeated smile on his lips.
Bam stood outside his parents’ house with his hands jammed in his pockets. He felt queasy, his chest tight and his palms sweaty, and while he was aware that his parents would respond with tolerance and understanding, he knew that they would be sad to see Nikki go. Moreover, the divorce would be yet another failure to add to the ever growing list. But he could not beat around the bush; he had to be honest, and not only for their sake. If he chose to push the problem to the back of his mind, it would come back to haunt him, and perhaps in the shape of a relapse. No, he had to address the issue and get it over with.

After having summoned up courage, Bam heaved a sigh of frustration and rang the doorbell. He listened to the annoyingly cheery melody that followed with a tormented look on his face, and he scratched his beard and thought about all the times he had disappointed his parents. When April finally opened the door and greeted him with a hug, a sudden flare of remorse and panic welled up in him. It all made his head ache.

“Hey there, Ape,” he said in a quiet voice laced with affection and hugged her back. “You look good.”

“Oh, you too, sweetie.” She smiled one of those motherly smiles, and for a moment, Bam was tempted to keep the bad news a secret. That smile was priceless – a rare gem – and he would wipe it off her face and replace it with a new line beside her mouth. He wanted to pretend that all was well, to lie and say that Nikki was visiting her parents in Chicago, but the news would reach her in one way or the other. If someone else told her before he did, she would feel hurt.

“Come in. Are you hungry? You’re just skin and bones nowadays.”

“I’m not-”

“I’ve made us some spaghetti,” she said before he could add anything to the conversation. “Where’s Nikki? Isn’t she joining us?”

Bam’s face contorted at the inquiry. He was stalling to buy time, taking off his shoes and jacket before he could remember the little speech he had prepared. As he gazed up and met her eyes, he knew that she had sensed that something was wrong. Her brows snapped together in mild confusion, and she cocked her head slightly to the side. Even if she said nothing, the question hung in the air between them. The silence was overwhelming.

“… Son?”

Bam opened and closed his mouth a few times, feeling as though she had read his mind already, and then he finally muttered, “No, I…” but then faltered. He scratched the back of his head and licked his
lips, dry and cracked as they were, and he kept his gaze fixed on the painting that hung on the wall behind her. It had been a gift from him to her; she had been close to bursting with pride. He drew in a sharp breath.

“… Look, Ape, I really need to talk to you about something. It’s kinda important.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re not drinking again?”

“What? No – of course not. It’s…” He paused, somewhat taken aback by how everyone kept assuming that he had relapsed. “It’s got nothing to do with alcohol, Mom. It’s… it’s something else.”

“Oh, okay then.” April wrinkled her forehead at the sparse comment and sat down on the couch. She studied her son with concern written all over her face. “What’s going on?” she asked. “Is everyone alright?”

“I… where’s Phil?” He looked around, nibbling on his lower lip. “I need to talk to him as well.”

“Phil!” April shouted to get her husband’s attention. The massive, overweight man sauntered into the living room and sat down in the armchair next to April. He greeted Bam with a smile and asked, “Isn’t dinner ready yet?”

“Bam wants to talk to us about something,” she informed him and folded her hands in her lap, worried that something had happened to one of her boys. After Ryan had tragically passed away, April had been afraid that Bam or the other boys would go down the same road. It had been a close call on more than one occasion, which had eventually put Bam in rehab. She thanked God for his recovery on a daily basis, though she knew that alcoholism was a lifelong battle; it was never truly defeated. One drop could ruin everything.

“Well, what’s up?” Phil asked, and Bam drew in a sharp breath and looked oddly uncomfortable.

“I’m… I’m going to Europe for a few months,” he told them and paused as a wave of nausea washed over him, causing him to close his eyes for half a second. A significant headache was beginning to make itself known, slowly needling its way through his skull. “I, um… I’ve got a new deal with Element, and I’ll be shooting some skate videos in Spain, pretty much, and… well, I’ll be going on my own, with a small crew of course, but none of the guys.”

April nodded and then let out a breath of relief. “Jesus, Bam,” she whispered, pressing her hand to her chest. “I nearly thought someone had…”

“Why Spain?” Phil asked.

“Why not?” Bam replied and smiled thinly. His father merely grunted at the response and asked, “Can we eat now?”

“And there’s another thing,” the skater said and looked down at his hands. “I’ve… um, yeah, I’ve broken things off with Nikki. We’re getting a divorce.”

Both of his parents fell silent at the admittance. Phil made an O with his mouth, but then pressed his lips together in a firm line. “Bam…” he said hesitantly, and then he shook his head. April shot him a dirty look, but took pity on him nonetheless. They had both hoped that Nikki would last.

“… Oh, Bam, sweetie,” she said and moved closer to her son on the sofa. Bam saw the pain reflected in her eyes, and he let her wrap an arm around him and hold him close. “Are you doing alright?”
Once again, she was referring to his sobriety, fearing a possible relapse. Bam rolled his eyes, annoyed that everyone kept pestering him about his former addiction. He had been in recovery for nine months, and he had proved to himself that he did not need alcohol to exist. It was a choice and a way of life he had adopted during his stay at a rehabilitation center, and he wished his family would accept that he was no longer ill; that he was no longer an alcoholic.

“Yeah, Ape. I mean…” he faltered and then paused upon noticing that tears were trickling down his mother’s cheeks. His heart sunk to the pit of his stomach. “It wasn’t an easy decision to make, but things have been weird between us for a while now. I guess I just… I kinda fell out of love, you know? We just lived the same day over and over, thinking it was normal. But in reality, we just got stuck in that pattern and were too lazy to move on. Too numb, maybe.”

She nodded and dried away tears. “I’m just sorry you have to go through a breakup in the middle of everything else,” she said and willed a smile to her lips. “You deserve to be happy.”

“Well, we weren’t happy. I think divorce is the only option, or else we’ll just go back to the same passive aggressive pattern.” As soon as the words had come out, he realized how true it was. Neither one of them had been satisfied, and while Nikki had been enraged, he knew that she would change her mind. When she eventually would run into Mr. Right on the street, she would be grateful, and moreover, she would understand that the divorce had been a blessing in disguise.

“As long as you know you’re making the right decision, dear,” April said and stroked his arm. “No one knows what’s right for you but you.”

“I know,” he said quietly and shrugged her hand away. He did not want anyone to pity him, least of all his mother. “Maybe we should eat? I mean, Phil looks like he’s starving to death over there.”

Phil grunted. “Enough with the fat jokes.”

“What?” Bam said and smiled. “I didn’t even call you fat – you did.”

“Bam,” April scolded him lightly, but she could not keep herself from laughing. The bickering between father and son made her feel somewhat nostalgic. Only one piece of the puzzle was missing – Ryan – and she felt a bittersweet kind of ache in her heart. As she entered the kitchen and saw the kettle on the counter, her eyes burned with tears. She remembered the solemn look on his face as he had asked, ‘Ape, will you learn me how to make tea?’ After that, he would always make her a nice cup of tea whenever he visited; he would always say, ‘good thing you taught me how to boil water’, and they would laugh.

She reheated the food and thought about Nikki, the sweet girl who had always helped her out in the kitchen, and she sighed. Bam had made more than a few errors when it came to love. The sad truth was that she could have told him that it would not last from the start, but who in their right mind would have listened to their mother when it came to matters of the heart?

“Dinner’s ready!” she declared and dried another tear from the crook of her eye. “I made that special sauce you and your brother love so much, and I’ve baked some cookies for you, the chocolate ones…” She trailed off, well aware that she would have better luck communicating with the dead. Her husband and child were discussing details about the trip to Spain, and Phil was speaking quite fondly about the food. She raised a brow, quite certain that he had never tried the Spanish cuisine before.

“Boys!” she yelled. “The food’s getting cold – again!”

“Coming!” Bam shouted.
April smiled and rolled her eyes in an affectionate manner. She walked into the dining room with the pot in her hands, and as she slipped off the oven mitts and put them aside, the look on her face become distant. It was evident that she was lost in thought, and her thoughts revolved around the divorce. If April were to be honest with herself, she would have said that she had seen it coming for a long time, and not because Nikki was not a good person, but because she was not the right person.

Bam stood in front of the fireplace and glared at the discolored spot on the wall. He held a framed picture under his right arm and contemplated whether he should hang it up on the wall or not. As he stood there, he heard the sound of his phone vibrating on the coffee table. For the first couple of seconds, he ignored the buzzing sound and continued to study the wall. The caller had other plans, however, and the phone kept vibrating on the tabletop, the sound getting on his nerves. With a sigh, he put the picture down and went to get his phone.

“… For fuck’s sake,” he muttered sourly, and as he picked up his iPhone, he saw his brother’s name and picture on the screen. At first, he assumed it was about Sam. Maybe he needed a babysitter? But then he remembered the dinner at his parents’ house – and the news he had shared. A ball of concern formed in his stomach, and alarm bells started going off inside his head. Would it be best to ignore the call? His brother had not exactly earned his trust over the years, and he had a feeling that he already knew the outcome of the conversation.

Bam, against his better judgment, answered the phone and said, “Hey, Jess. How’s it going?”

“Bam,” he heard Jess sigh. “What the fuck is going on? I just got off the phone with Mom-”

“Look, it’s none of your business,” the younger of the two snarled. “I broke things off with Nikki, and that’s that. There’s nothing more to it.”

“How the fuck can you just ‘break things off’ with someone you’ve been married to for years?” Jess demanded, his voice taking on that paternal, know-it-all tone that had Bam gritting his teeth. “Nikki’s a gorgeous woman, way out of your league, and you – you-,” he cut himself short, letting out a mirthless laugh. “You’re insane to kick her to the curb, Bam. What, do you really think you can do better?”

Bam raked his fingers through his hair and let out a sound that was caught between a sigh and a groan, frustrated with his older brother and his inability to move forward.

“Yeah, you know what, bro? It’s my fucking life,” he shot back. “You’ve got no right to criticize me, just like I’ve got no fucking right to criticize you, which I’ve never done, by the way.”

He imagined his brother fuming on the other end of the line, his knuckles white from clenching his fists too hard. Jess had always been opinionated and unforgiving, and he could not agree with Bam about anything, let alone his marriage. After he had ended things with Ville, Jess had urged him to marry Missy. When the relationship had crumbled and eventually ended in a fiery pit of doom, Jess had become livid. He had pointed the finger at Bam and accused him of being self-absorbed. Deep down, Bam knew what had sparked his brother’s rage back then – and now, but he hated to think the thought.

“You’re her whole world, man, and then you just end things?” Jess asked, his tone biting and
berating, and Bam felt more and more wrought up by the second. “You just kick her out?”

“You don’t know shit about me, Jess,” Bam stated and rubbed the nape of his neck. In spite of the anger, he felt his heart sinking. “Me and Nikki have barely spoken to one another these past few months – ever since I got out of rehab – and I’m doing her a fucking favor. No one wants to be stuck in a loveless marriage, and I know that you understand as much, Jess.”

Jess let out a snort of disbelief. “You lost the baby a month ago-”

“Don’t,” the younger man cautioned.

There came a deep sigh from the other end of the line. “Listen to me, Bam,” Jess eventually said, emphasizing all three words. Bam knew some kind of lecture was about to come. “You’re just really fucking messed up right now, Bam. I know it ain’t easy to go through what you’ve gone through. But you’re the man here, and right now, Nikki needs you-”

“You know what?” Bam interfered, his tone of voice brimming over with resentment. He was beginning to grow tired of the argument, especially seeing as it was a camouflage for something else, something neither of them wanted to admit openly. As it were, Jess could not have cared less about Nikki, and they should have been arguing over Jess and his homophobia, not the divorce. “I don’t get why you’re defending her when you know nothing about our marriage. You haven’t even visited since September!”

Jess let out a bitter laugh. “Yeah, ’cause I’ve been working non-stop, something you ought to learn a thing or two about!”

The younger man pinched the bridge of his nose and began pacing back and forth in the living room. “You’re my brother, Jess. Don’t you think it’d be more normal to side with me rather than her?”

Silenced by the comment, Jess drew in a sharp breath. “Why can’t you be in a normal fucking relationship, Bam?” he asked, and he sounded sincere. The truth was that he had not questioned Bam’s ability to function in a relationship, but he had questioned his normalcy. It was condescending and belittling, and Bam felt as though someone had punched him square in the face.

“Well, you know what?” he asked, his voice thick with disappointment. “You should know the answer to that better than anyone.”

“Bam-”

Click. Bam had ended the call. For what felt like hours, he stood there with his iPhone in his clammy hand and watched the air. Bile burned at the back of his throat, and he swallowed, trying to keep it down. The adrenaline had worn off by then, but he still felt shaky and on edge. Good thing Jess had not stopped by the house; one of them would have sported a black eye after what would have undoubtedly escalated into a full-blown fist fight.

He eventually put his iPhone back down on the table and let out a harsh breath, sad and disappointed that his brother still viewed him as something subhuman. Bam knew what he was afraid of – he knew what he had labelled him as – and he could do nothing to change his perception. Even if he disagreed with certain aspects of Bam’s life, he should have risen above spewing out hateful nonsense. It caused them nothing but misery.

“… Motherfucker,” he whispered under his breath and then walked back to the fireplace. The picture rested against the wall and reminded him of the task his brother had made him forget. As he stared at it, a wicked smile touched his lips. If his brother had been there, he would have shouted at him,
because he had once insisted that Bam should remove the picture. He had taken it down, but he had not managed to throw it away, and it had waited patiently in the garage for many years. Seeing it now was like seeing an old friend again.

Bam put it back up on the wall and studied it with a self-satisfied smirk. Then he added a quiet, “Haista vittu, motherfucker,” for old time’s sake. It matched the picture, which depicted a group of five people who all looked quite glum. What softened the allover impression was the man in the middle, the man whose green eyes sparkled dangerously. His lips curved into a Mona Lisa smile that was as secretive as it was expressive, especially if one knew what lingered on his mind. Bam knew. He had been the photographer that day, and he had a very fond memory of what had happened after the photoshoot. He remembered worshipping the statuesque body in the privacy of their bedroom; he remembered tasting the sweat on his skin while making him moan. The thought warmed his heart, and he took comfort in knowing that he had made the right decision; Nikki was the last thing on his mind.

Bam still studied the picture intently; he could not get the memory out of his head. He remembered alabaster skin smoother than milk, green eyes that held all the secrets of the universe in them, and long, dark locks that flowed down his back. He remembered kisses and touches that were carved into his being, and looking back, he still felt them brushing against his skin.

Right then and there, nothing could have wiped the smug grin off Bam’s face, not even Jess and his narrow-minded prejudices. It dawned on him that he was in fact his own person, and no one could order him around and tell him who he should be; no one could choose what direction his life would take. Bam would make the decisions on his own this time around, and for once in his life, he enjoyed the idea of being responsible for his own happiness. Or failure.

17:36 p.m.        29.09.2006

“A family dinner?” Ryan asked, his eyebrows nearly touching his hairline. “So… what does that even mean?”

Bam gave him a long look. “Well… family?”

“What about me?”

“You’re invited. Duh.” Bam rolled his eyes. “I’ve known you forever.”

Ryan shrugged. “Well, you’ve never celebrated your birthday by throwing a family dinner.” He looked somewhat puzzled upon saying this, and then realization dawned on his face. A sly smile slid onto his face and he said, “It’s got something to do with Walo, right?”

The younger man scratched his chin while awkwardly looking down at his shoes. “Uh… yeah… I’m just inviting Ape and Phil, and Jess,” he decided and then gazed up to meet Ryan’s eyes. He appeared to be amused by Bam’s discomfort, but that was hardly something new. “And you and Raab, of course.”

“Aw, we’re part of the family,” Ryan said jokingly. “And what about Walo? Is he part of the family too? Kinda gives me a Manson Family sort of vibe.”

Bam shot him a dirty look. “I-”

“Bam! Ville’s here!” April shouted from the driveway. Bam’s whole face lit up at the thought of seeing Ville again. He nearly squealed with excitement, and the grin on his face was sincere, almost
like a child who was about to go to Disneyland for the first time. Ryan frowned, though he was unsurprised by the emotional display, having known Bam too long to feel surprised. He watched his best friend as he sprinted toward the entrance of Castle Bam with that same, unwavering smile on his face, and he was glad to see that Bam was head over heels in love.

When Bam rounded the corner, he immediately came to an abrupt halt. His heart skipped a beat as he took in the sight of Ville – mesmerizing as always – and he let the happiness soak right into his bones. Ville stood next to his mother and chitchatted about the weather and the pretty roses she had planted in the driveway. A soft ripple of laughter emerged from the singer, and Bam knew he was blushing and felt like an idiot for it, but he could not help himself. Seeing Ville again brought on the same feeling one gets when spring is in the air and flowers begin to blossom. He had long dreamt of that exact moment, and it was perfect.

“Willa!” he screamed with excitement. It caused the Finn and his mother to jump, both of them thoroughly surprised, and then he turned to look at Bam. The moment their eyes met, the corners of Ville’s mouth turned up, and he walked toward Bam with open arms, drawing him in for a warm embrace. The skater felt slender arms around his waist and took in the scent of apple shampoo and cigarettes, appreciating the fact that he smelled exactly the same as before.

“I’ve-missed-you-so-fucking-much!” Bam gushed with the enthusiasm of a five-year-old.

“Oh, Bammie,” Ville laughed joyfully. “I missed you too.”

April appeared undisturbed by the emotional reunion, and she even smiled. As far as she knew they were friends and colleagues, and they had defied distances and differences in order to collaborate. Over the years, they had grown close and were now attached to one another, but she had never had a reason to believe that their relationship went beyond friendship. However, she did have a hunch that something was going on, though for an entirely different reason. Bam had sent out invitations for a family dinner, and Bam hated family dinners with a passion. Ville’s presence added to the mystery.

“Let’s get you unpacked,” Bam said and grabbed Ville’s suitcase.

“Or maybe just get me a pillow,” the green-eyed man said jokingly. He had dark circles underneath his eyes, and Bam knew he was dead on his feet. “I could sleep in the flower bed.”

Bam raised an eyebrow and laughed. “Ape would be livid. She only just planted some roses.”

Ville gasped dramatically. “Are you saying I couldn’t pass for a rose?”

“Fine, you’re a fucking flower,” the skater said and nudged Ville in the arm. “Fucking weirdo.”

Both of them laughed and continued to tease one another as they walked upstairs. As they reached the hallway, they passed the guest room and went straight to the master bedroom. Ville was quick to observe that the bed had been made and Bam had tossed all his dirty clothes into the laundry hamper. There was not as much as a speck of dust on the floor.

“So,” Ville began as he plopped down on the soft mattress, “what’s the plan?”

Bam shrugged and threw himself onto the bed, making a mess of the flowery bedspread April had bought him in the process. “I dunno… cuddle with me?”

Ville laid back wearily against the huge pile of fluffy pillows and smiled, holding his arm out in an invitation for Bam to lay down by his side. The skater rested his head against the older man’s chest, and Ville gently ran his fingers through his messy curls and stroked the side of his face. When Bam had eased into the touch, Ville sang softly to him in Finnish. It reminded them both of their vacation
in Finland back in July – a fond memory they both cherished – and Bam sighed contentedly. He listened to the steady rhythm of Ville’s heartbeat, and for a moment, he felt that heaven was real. It existed in Ville’s arms.

“I missed you,” Bam whispered and gently nuzzled Ville’s neck. The Finn stopped caressing the younger man’s face and took a hold of his hand, entwining their fingers.

“Two months have never felt more endless, darling,” Ville commented, reassuring him that he had felt the same dire longing. “I thought about you all the time, you know.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm,” Ville hummed and closed his eyes. It had been a long flight, and he had not been able to sleep. The thought of seeing Bam again had kept him awake. Now that he was in Westchester with Bam nestled in his arms, he felt like getting some much needed shut-eye, especially now that he was at peace with the world.

“Hey, you can’t sleep!” Bam whined and pouted like an errant child. The singer heaved a sigh, feigning annoyance, and he tousled Bam’s hair and muttered, “I couldn’t sleep on the plane.”

“But,” Bam began, “you haven’t even kissed me yet!”

Ville chuckled. “Well, you haven’t kissed me yet either.”

The younger man sat upright in an instant and smiled with that I-can-do-no-wrong beam that decidedly meant trouble. It was infectious. Ville felt like a bold and unruly teenager again, even if the tiredness ached in his bones and the voice in the back of his head told him to take a nap.

“Is that a challenge?” Bam asked in a suggestive tone of voice.

“Maybe,” Ville said, and one of those male, self-satisfied smirks slid onto his face. “Do you want it to be?”

Bam’s eyes gleamed dangerously. “You know I love a challenge…”

“Prove it,” Ville whispered; his dark and husky voice was enough to drive any man insane with lust, and Bam growled and crawled on top him, pinning his arms over his head. Desire burned in his large green eyes, and he licked his lips seductively, causing the younger man to groan.

“… You little cunt,” Bam said, and then he let out a small laugh. “I fucking love you so much…”

The comment softened the Finn’s heart, and he smiled tenderly. “You too, Bammie.”

The American grinned and caressed the singer’s neck with gentle fingers. When the Finn shivered under his touch, Bam felt triumphant, and he could not help but to whisper, “You’re beautiful. Perfect.”

Ville suppressed a snort, and for a split second, he looked away. Bam would not have it; his nose nuzzled his neck, and he breathed deeply, savoring his scent. And as he inched his way up Ville’s neck and toward his mouth, he whispered, “Perfect,” over and over. Ville breathed heavily in response. His hand reached for Bam’s, and he lightly brushed his thumb across his knuckles. The skin there was rough, a result of all the beating his body had withstood over the years, and Ville could not help but to marvel at all the scars and bruises. He had mapped them out ages ago and loved each and every one of them.
“You’re perfect,” Bam whispered firmly into the singer’s ear. As he drew back, he relished the beautiful sight before his eyes; Ville’s lips were slightly parted, and his eyes were hungry and searching. They begged him to continue. Bam was only too happy to oblige.

He lowered his face to Ville’s and pressed his mouth against Ville’s plump, velvety lips. At first, he merely smiled against the older man’s mouth, and then he kissed him, softly at first, and then harder and deeper; he kissed him with fervent urgency. He kissed him for every day they had been apart, and he kissed him for every moment they would spend bereft of each other’s company. Ville let out a quiet moan that sent shivers down Bam’s spine, allowing him to deepen the kiss and taste him.

“… B-boys?”

They stopped dead in their tracks and glanced over to the door. April stood there with lemonade on a tray and looked absolutely flabbergasted at the sight that had met her eyes. And then realization hit her hard. She plopped down on Bam’s swivel chair and drew in a sharp breath. A quiet, “Oh,” escaped her dazzled mind.

“Uh… Ape, I… Ville and I… uh…” Bam’s brain decided to stop working altogether. He felt a little bit sick to his stomach about her walking in on them like that, especially when she had no idea about their relationship. Ville, who had looked like a deer in the headlights, started laughing at his stuttering sweetheart. April quickly joined in, because never in a million years had she expected to find her son in a compromising position with Ville.

“I’m sorry, Ape,” Ville said and put his hand on Bam’s shoulder, trying his best to comfort him. “We didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Oh, I… wait, is this why we’re suddenly doing this whole family dinner thing for your birthday, Bam?”

“… Uh-huh,” Bam confirmed and then scratched his head, not sure what else to say.

April chuckled and handed each of them a glass of lemonade. “Well, I’m happy for you no matter who you’re dating, dear,” she said and smiled at the two of them. She had always been fond of Ville and did not at all lament the fact that Bam was in love with a man. She did, however, find it quite amusing that Bam was so embarrassed, because he was never embarrassed about anything.

“Uh… thanks, Ape,” he muttered a little sourly. He had never been easily fazed, especially not by things of a romantic or sexual nature, but this situation had been particularly awkward. Ville seemed to be the exception to his every rule, and right then and there, he could not decide whether it was unfortunate or not.

“Your brother will be here in an hour,” she said and then giggled. “He’ll get a surprise, won’t he.”

Ville smiled a tender smile at the woman he had come to adore. She had welcomed him with open arms, and although he had realized by now that this was the American way, he still hugely appreciated it. She had always felt like a second mother to him.

“I’ll see you boys in a little while then,” she said and closed the door behind her as she left the room. She probably had tons of things to do before the family dinner. Even if she lived and breathed her role as a mother, Ville felt somewhat bad for her, always running about and doing errands for her son.

“Fuck,” Bam groaned and slumped his head against Ville’s shoulder. The Finn simply laughed at the younger man’s despair. “We are grown men,” he commented. Bam frowned. “What’s that got to do
“I helped my dad pick out dildos for gay couples at the sex shop when I was sixteen.”

“… That sounds painful,” Bam said and grimaced at the odd mental images that popped up inside his head.

“I never thought anything of it, truly,” Ville assured him. “It was just a job like any other job.” He gently touched his lips to the crown of Bam’s hair and then began humming a cheerful tune. “And just be glad we didn’t do anything but kiss!”

“We were making out,” Bam groaned, annoyed with himself for having let that happen. “I should’ve locked the damn door.”

“… That’s a brilliant idea for next time,” Ville purred seductively in his ear, his voice low and husky like only Ville’s voice could be.

“Another challenge?”

“I think I’ve had enough of those for now,” the green-eyed man chortled. “To be frank, I think I need to take a nap before the whole family dinner thing. I really am exhausted.”

Bam, much to Ville’s surprise, did not protest.

“Yeah, you do that,” Bam agreed, still taken aback by what had happened only minutes before. As he twisted around to look the Finn in the eyes, he could tell that he had already fallen asleep. The twenty-seven-year-old found this to be quite endearing, and for a couple of minutes, he simply listened to the quiet snores and watched the steady rise and fall of his chest.

“… Willa,” he said out loud, though he knew he was asleep. When Ville slept, he looked younger, and Bam knew he was more complicated than he would ever let on. He would never admit it, perhaps not even to himself, but the years of fame had altered him. Bam knew how it felt, and he knew that Ville doubted himself and his own sincerity. It sometimes robbed him of his sleep, but never when Bam was around. In the company of someone who truly saw him for who he was, he felt safe and comfortable in his own skin.

The Finn sighed and shifted in his sleep. Bam smiled to himself, and he traced the features of his lover’s face with his eyes. He was undoubtedly the most beautiful man Bam had ever seen. His milky white skin was unmarred by scars and untouched by the sun; his chiseled features were strong and masculine and in stark contrast to the slender body he thought so frail. His heart swelled with absolute love, and it was the most annoying and yet delightful feeling he had ever harbored for another human being. It was precious; it was impossible.

A knock on the door broke his chain of thoughts. Ryan’s face peeked in from behind the door, and Bam mouthed, “Shut up” before he rose from the bed and cautiously snuck out of the bedroom.

“What?” he asked gruffly, which caused the older man to raise an eyebrow.

“Dude,” he said, “your brother’s here. Or were you planning on staying in your bedroom for the whole evening?”

Bam rolled his eyes at the question. “I haven’t seen Willa in two months.”

Ryan let out a short bark of laughter. “Yeah, yeah, I get it, you’ve suffered through intolerable levels of hardship…” He rolled his eyes and asked, “How’s he doing, by the way?”
The skater laughed at the comment. “Yeah, I’ve had it rough, and it’s my birthday—”

“That was yesterday, so I don’t have to be nice to you,” the bearded man said, and his eyes gleamed mischievously. “Now, about everyone’s favorite Finn…”

“He’s doing fine, jeez,” Bam said with an odd look on his face. “Just a little tired from the long flight and all, but that’s pretty normal, don’t you think.”

Something dangerous flashed over Ryan’s face upon hearing this. Bam had a very distinct feeling regarding what it was about. “You’re gonna say some shit about that flight to Helsinki…” he stated, knowing Ryan better than he even knew himself, and then he let out a sigh of annoyance. Ryan was dying to tell everyone about Bam’s first ‘encounter’ with HIM. If there was one thing Bam wanted to keep a secret, it was that discovery – perhaps mostly due to the fact that it had taken him years to understand his own feelings – and he would be made the laughing stock of the family.

“I’ve already come clean to Willa about that. He didn’t even laugh that hard about it,” he lied.

“Oh, really?” his best friend asked with a way too innocent smile plastered on his face.

“Fuck you,” Bam laughed. “Seriously, I think Phil will have a hard enough time coping with—”

“That’s bullshit, Bam. Your parents have had to deal with a lot worse from you.”

The birthday boy shrugged, though he could not help but to flinch as he remembered what his mother had walked in on half an hour ago. He would rather pretend that it had not happened, but he knew he would have to hear about it for a long, long time.

“I won’t bring it up,” Ryan eventually said, “but I still think it’s a great story.”

“It is,” Bam agreed, “but it’s not for everyone.”

18:53 p.m.

They all sat around the dining table and talked loudly, one voice drowning the other as jokes and stories were recounted. Every witty remark made by the birthday boy was greeted by a salvo of laughter from the guests, and Raab nearly spit out his mouthful of food. He caught himself and swallowed hard before pounding the table with his fists until the candles tumbled over. The flames had gone out in the fall, but April, always the responsible parent, went pale with worry. She had, after all, decorated the table with small, flammable paper flowers and colorful napkins.

“Raab,” she said warningly and put the cylinders of vax back in place.

“Sorry,” the blond mumbled and offered her an apologetic smile. “Wasn’t thinking.”

“You’re never thinking,” Ryan pointed out, and the comment sent another bout of laughter around the room. The junkie shrugged; he did not particularly mind being ridiculed. April, who cared little for such comments, shook her head and began fumbling for the box of matches. When she could not find it, she frowned and sighed, annoyed with herself for having misplaced it.

“I’ve got it, Ape,” Ville said, flashing his pearly whites in one of those delightful smiles of his. Always the perfect gentleman, he produced a lighter and lit the candles for her.

“Thank you, Ville,” she smiled and resumed to her seat between Phil and Jess. Despite the fact that
they were celebrating Bam’s birthday, she showered her eldest child with attention. Jess, being a busy musician, did not visit much and rarely even called home. However, the moment he began telling them about a particularly bibulous night out with the band, April covered her ears and pretended not to hear. The faint blush on her cheeks gave her away, and Jess, who shared Bam’s enthusiasm for embarrassing their parents, grinned and further embroidered his story with quirky, colorful details.

“… And that’s when I told her, ‘I’m not really a prostitute’!”

“Jess!” April scolded. “Oh my God – why did you do that?”

“Your brother’s quite the storyteller,” Ville commented, having listened in on the conversation. He smiled and thought that even his parents would have blushed had he told them such a graphic tale.

“Yeah, I-”

Bam burped loudly from where he sat next to the Finn. When he finally stopped laughing at his own body sounds, he turned and saw the amused look on his lover’s face. He had the decency to blush and said, “Sorry. Food’s good.”

“And the drinks are even better,” Ville commented, gently elbowing him in the side. “Always gets you in the right mood.”

Bam nearly choked on his hotdog. “I, uh…” he whispered, and Ville laughed at his misery.

“Hey, Bam!” Jess said loudly from across the table. The moment their eyes met, Jess’ mouth curved into a smile, and he nodded politely at Ville.

“What’s up, bro?”

The eldest of the two brothers’ leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his neck. “What’s up with the whole ‘family dinner’ thing?” he asked, raising one eyebrow in an inquiring manner. The look on his face was suddenly less amiable, and he gave a mirthless laugh and said, “Well?”

Bam felt his mouth go dry. “Oh, yeah…” he muttered and sent Ville a perplexed look, silently begging for help, but he looked equally forlorn. Only then did Bam see the four empty beer cans in front of him, and he realized that he was on his own.

“Just say it,” Ryan urged, and Bam, who had always looked to Ryan for support, felt soothed by the acceptance and warmth that was reflected in his eyes. Everyone kept their gaze fixed on Bam, patiently awaiting an explanation for the celebration, and he could tell that they were confused. Phil, who had put his hamburger down, studied his son’s face intently. April put her hand on her husband’s arm, well aware that the news would catch him off guard. A warm smile lifted the corners of her mouth; her blue eyes burned with motherly affection.

Bam cleared his throat. “Well,” he started and gave Ville a questioning look. “I’ve got – wait, no, we’ve got something of an announcement to make.” As he said the latter part, he put his hand on Ville’s shoulder. It had been glaringly obvious that Ville was the odd one out. Everyone present was family, or as good as family, and they had all taken notice of the exception. While they had all come to realize that the Finnish rockstar was the exception to Bam’s every rule, they had not understood his presence that day.

“Come on, Bammie,” Ville whispered encouragingly. His green eyes sparkled happily, as though coming out to one’s family was the most natural and simple thing in the world, and he squeezed his
hand reassuringly under the table. “Tell them. It’ll be fine.”

Bam squeezed Ville’s hand and swallowed thickly. He was trying to find the right words, though he knew there were no right or wrong words to be said. It was either the truth or nothing.

The skater drew in a shaky breath and said, “When I went to Finland in July, me and Willa got to spend some quality time together for the first time in ages… and that was pretty awesome.” As soon as the words had fallen from his lips, he took notice of the frown on his brother’s face. “I guess we – we realized a few things about ourselves – about our relationship. The pieces kinda just came together, you know, and… well, we realized we’re in love…”

He paused, at a loss for words. Only then did he realize that he had in fact spilled the secret, and his heart started beating furiously. The sound of blood rushing through his head became all-consuming. He immediately wondered what his father and brother thought of him. Often, and without any consideration or empathy, they had bad-mouthed ‘gays’ and ‘faggots’, deeming them as something vile and unnatural. Bam had been in on it, mainly because that had been the norm, and he now felt like weeping for his own thoughtlessness. He assumed that they both viewed him as a mutant – as a worthless nobody – and he closed his eyes, momentarily regretting his decision to speak.

“… Bammie,” Ville breathed, dragging him back to the present. His green orbs shone with pride and affection, and Bam felt the poisonous thoughts being drawn from his mind. “Go on, darling.”

“So, we’re… uh, we’re together now,” he stated and made eye contact with his parents. “We’re a thing.”

His palms were sweaty. Ville’s hand was still there, keeping him from losing his courage and keeping him from losing his mind. As his eyes swept over their baffled faces, he valued the fact that Ville sat next to him and loved him for simply being himself. It lessened the intensity of his burden.

“… I,” Jess said and ran a hand through his short and ruffled hair, “I did not see that one coming.”

“I did,” Raab said, and Ryan could not help but to laugh. How this had gone over Jess’ head was beyond him.

Phil unexpectedly rose from the table. The four legs of the chair screeched against the floor, stealing the attention away from the birthday boy, and he cleared his throat and said, “Bam,” in a firm voice. When their eyes met, Bam noticed that his father’s face was contorted with conflicting emotions. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead, and he breathed heavily and looked as though he was about to come apart at the seams.

“Don’t look all sad, son. I think this is a happy occasion, isn’t it?” he pointed out when the silence had towered over them for an uncomfortable amount of time. Phil, being a simple man with simple beliefs, felt thoroughly ashamed. His son, who was never embarrassed and never afraid, had nearly gone to pieces, and for what? For fear of his reaction to his relationship; for fear of rejection.

“… You’re not…” Bam said in a hushed tone, “you’re not upset?”

“No.” Phil shook his head, and the skater let out a sigh of relief. Seeing Bam’s expression visibly soften both soothed him and angered him, and he felt disgusted with himself for having been narrow-minded and prejudiced in the past. “Ville’s a good guy. Everyone here loves and supports you, and it isn’t really any different from any other relationship, is it? Like I said, Ville’s a good guy.” He smiled then, and his eyes were glossy and filled with tender affection. “He’ll make you happy.”

“Oh, honey,” April whispered silently and dried an emotional tear from the crook of her eye.
A loud snort suddenly came from Jess. “Are you serious, Dad?” he asked, and he had the same disbelieving frown attached to his face. “You’re just gonna sit there and do nothing? It’s ridiculous,” he snarled, slamming his fist in the table. “Do you hear me? This is the most disgusting thing I’ve seen all my life!”

“… Jess,” Phil said and furrowed his brows, “calm down.”

For a moment, the eldest of the Margera brothers’ looked as though someone had slapped him, and his normally attractive features twisted into a horrid expression. “No!” he then shouted at the top of his voice. “Bam’s just Ville’s little boy toy! Can’t you all see that?”

“Jess!” April gasped, stunned by her son’s outburst. “How can you say that? Ville’s been nothing but a gentleman – to all of us – and you better apologize this instant!”

“Now, that’s rich,” Jess snapped and let out a laugh that was all but amused. “That’s so fucking rich, Mom.”

Bam said nothing, though he watched his sibling in wide-eyed surprise. The comments were so out of character for Jess, so far from the kind and supportive big brother Bam viewed him as, he simply stared at him with his jaw set. Ville, who was equally taken aback by the hateful attitude, still held Bam’s hand firmly in his.

“What on earth is the matter with you?” their mother asked, voice marred by disbelief and anger. To her, who had raised her sons’ to be tolerant and loving people, the temper tantrum thrown by her eldest seemed farfetched and groundless. From the beginning of their friendship, during a time when Bam had been immature and reckless, Ville had shown the utmost grace and had only enriched Bam’s life. “How can you be so mean?”

“Bam’s been obsessed with Ville for what, six years?” Jess claimed and gave the Finn the evil eye, completely unashamed. “He doesn’t know what he’s getting himself tangled into! He’s just – he’s caving in! Don’t you see that?” He paused for a moment and watched his mother’s tearstained face, waiting for the words to sink in.

“… Jess,” she wailed. Despair was written all over her face.

“He’s letting Ville have his way with him,” he said in a voice that could cut glass and fixed the Finn with a hateful glare.

“… I think you ought to shut the fuck up,” Ryan said in a strangely calm tone of voice. “And I think you should go home now. We don’t need this – this is a fucking happy occasion.” His eyes were suddenly ablaze with fury; however, he did not lose his head. “So just leave, man.”

“Make sure to bring all your bullshit with you,” Raab added.

Jess let out another angry laugh. “That’s just rich,” he said again and repeatedly knocked his fist against the table. “Ville’s been ogling Bam ever since he was a fucking kid, don’t you all get that? Bam worshipped the ground he walked on, and now Ville’s taking advantage of that. It’s abuse, that’s what it’s called!”

Everyone at the table looked at Jess in stunned silence. Ville was white as a sheet and kept his eyes fixed on his hands. He was mortified. When Bam noticed that his lover was trembling with suppressed anger and terror, it was as though the fuse had been lit.

“… What did you say?” Bam demanded quietly. His face was flushed red, and his hands were squeezed into fists on either side of his body. Jess remained silent, somewhat frightened by the
fearsome look on his younger brother’s face. Further provoked by Jess’ silence, Bam swiftly rose from the chair and walked over to him with an expression that was all but kind. He looked as though he was capable of murder.

“What the fuck did you just say about him!?” he screamed furiously, now only seconds away from losing his head completely, and when no answer was given, he grabbed his brother forcibly by the neck. “Huh?”

“The fucker’s just using you,” Jess finally said, adding insult to injury, and Bam saw red. Something inside of him clicked, almost as though a switch had been flicked on. He raised his fists, and a hard punch instantly connected with Jess’ jaw and sent his head back. A sudden gush of pain jolted through Jess’ skull; a low moan escaped his lips. He widened his eyes and touched the side of his face disbelievingly. Bam had never violently attacked him before.

“Bam!” April cried out and ran over to her eldest son. He was bleeding from where Bam’s knuckles had scraped against his skin. “Oh my God,” she sobbed and put a napkin to Jess’ face, but he pushed her away and got up from the chair. He was not happy.

“You’re out of line,” he hissed at his little brother.

“Fuck you!” Bam yelled and shoved him back with a firm push to the chest. “You fucking deserved it, you fucking homophobic little piece of shit!”

“Bam,” April said and pulled her youngest son away by the arm. “Go back inside. I’ll deal with your brother.”

Bam swiftly withdrew from his mother’s touch and said, “I’ll believe it when I fucking see it!”

He glowered at Jess with tears of frustration shining in his eyes. It was a look that conveyed a stinging bitterness, a bubbling hatred that had been birthed only minutes ago, and Jess stared back. He smoldered with resentment and exasperation, utterly astounded by their reaction. In his mind, he had revealed the truth about the Finnish rockstar, and they were choosing to turn a blind eye to his perverted nature.

“Don’t you dare set foot on my property again,” Bam said with his lips spread back from his teeth. “D’you hear me? I don’t ever want to see you again!”

Jess let out a strained laugh and ran a hand through his hair. He was speechless.

Bam realized that his brother had nothing left to say. His silence infuriated him even more than the fight and the cruel comments, and he knew that his brother hoped to tug at his heartstrings and make him feel guilty. With this in mind, Bam walked away from the scene, his hands still tightened into fists at his sides.

Ville, who had not said a single word, appeared to be shell-shocked. As he watched his lover disappear up the stairs, he looked as if he was shrinking into himself, his eyes cast down at the floor.

“Hope you’re happy, Valo,” Jess spat. “This is all on you.”

“Jess!” Phil scolded him, and the look on his face was that of outright horror. “You need to leave.”

Jess shrugged. “Fine. Whatever,” he said in an icy tone of voice. “I was just trying to do you all a favor – I know I’m right about him, and you’ll learn it the hard way!” For a moment, the eldest of the two brothers’ stood in the doorway and watched their faces, studying them for traces of doubt. When his eyes finally landed on Ville, he grunted and said, “You’ll hurt him – I know it.”
“Get lost!” Raab barked.

Jess rolled his eyes, but he left the house nonetheless. Everyone present was glad to see the back of him, and as they heard his car leaving the driveway, they all felt somewhat relieved. April immediately plopped down on a chair and shook her head again and again, thoroughly rattled by the confrontation. Never in a million years had she thought she would see her two boys in a heated argument. She prayed that it would be a one-time thing.

“Are you alright, dude?” Ryan asked Ville in a sympathetic tone. The Finn opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, and he was blinking back tears of embarrassment and shame.

“I-I…” he stuttered and then put his hand over his mouth. He could not come up with anything to say.

“… Ville,” April said and stroked a caring hand down the singer’s back. Her blue eyes swam with tears, and Ville swallowed tickly, thinking this was his fault somehow. “Don’t blame yourself for his little outburst… He’s worried about Bam, that’s all-”

“Ape,” Ryan said, voice cold and full of anger. “Don’t make up excuses for Jess, okay? He isn’t a little kid, and he should know when to keep his mouth shut – especially if he’s a full-blown homophobe. He’s being an asshole and you know it.”

The blonde nodded. “Yes, I… I know that. It’s just…” She paused and averted her gaze, shameful that her child could be so condescending. “I’m sorry, Ville, dear. You don’t deserve any of this.”

“No, he really doesn’t,” Ryan said, his arms folded over his chest.

Ville suddenly rose from his seat. “I’m sorry,” he whispered and willed a small smile to his lips. “In spite of everything, the food was really very lovely, Ape.” With that said, he hurried up the stairs, eager to get away from it all. The four people left in the room exchanged long and worried looks.

“Never knew he was a homophobe,” Raab eventually commented and smoothed down his shirt, looking more than a little uncomfortable with the outcome of the evening. It should have been a joyous occasion for everyone involved, but then disaster had struck in the shape of Jess Margera.

“… No, he isn’t,” April said and folded her hands neatly in her lap. “He’s just…”

“I need to have a chat with him about that,” Phil grunted. “Should’ve known better, or at least had the decency to keep his mouth shut.”

Ryan raked his fingers through his hair and let out a sigh of frustration. “What a fucking asshole,” he said and then turned to look at April. “How often does Bam look to anyone for approval? If I had pulled the bullshit Jess did just now, I would’ve fucking offed myself! Jesus!” he growled and then stood up from the table. “I’m going to give him a piece of my fucking mind-”

“Ryan,” April whispered. She looked stunned.

“I agree,” Raab said and shook his head. “That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen at a family dinner. And I’ve been to a few bad ones…”

The ginger rubbed his forehead. “Yeah, I… Don’t worry, I won’t lose my head like Bam did,” he reassured the now weeping blonde. “But this isn’t acceptable. Shouldn’t be.”

Having said that, Ryan left the house in pursuit of the eldest of the Margera brothers. An angry vein was still visible on his forehead; his skin was still flushed red.
Bam lay face downwards on the bed. His body shook with tremors of distress, and Ville, who peeked at Bam from behind the door, heard the sound of muffled sobs and whimpers from where his lover’s face was buried in a pillow. He paused in the doorway, hesitating, and then walked toward the bed. Once he stood hovering over his weeping sweetheart, he felt his lower lip twitching, and the thought of Jess’ harsh comments filled him with indignation. Jess, who had always been held in high esteem by friends and family, had stabbed his little brother in the back; he had twisted the knife around and passed judgement on their relationship as though he were a saint. But, as he watched Bam weep over the bitter rejection, he felt nothing but sorrow.

“… Bammie,” Ville said silently and placed one hand between Bam’s shoulder blades. The younger man flinched at the touch but then immediately eased into it. “I’m sorry that had to happen.”

The skater abruptly shifted into a sitting position. As he locked eyes with Ville, he found that his own agony was reflected in his green orbs. He knew Ville was blaming himself for the fight, as though he had added fuel to the fire by simply being there, and Bam felt angered by the thought. For a split second, he wished he had hit Jess as hard as he would have hit one of his friends. He should have given him a black eye.

“Ville,” he whispered and gently tugged at the older man’s sleeve, wordlessly pleading for him to sit down on the bed next to him, “don’t feel bad. It’s not your fucking fault.”

Ville squeezed his eyes shut. The moment he opened them again, fat tears began rolling down his face, and he asked, “Do you think he’s right?”

A deep frown appeared on Bam’s face. “What the fuck are you on about?”

The Finn bit his lower lip. “I don’t know…” he whispered. “I just… I didn’t know anyone hated me like that – like I’m a disease-ridden piece of shit – and, I don’t know, evil.” He looked away, and it seemed that his features changed, became remote, distant. “There’s got to be a reason for it, don’t you think?”

“No!” Bam hollered, causing Ville to shudder. “No,” he repeated in a softer tone of voice. “He’s… I think he just said the first stupid, immature crap that fell into his head. I dunno why he’s acting like that. Never really thought he had an issue with you, or with… uh, with non-straight people.” He bit his lip at the latter part. “With gays, I mean.”

Ville’s dark eyes were pensive, almost thoughtful, and they were directly aimed at Bam. “If you weren’t his little brother,” he said in a low voice and put his hand on top of Bam’s, “if you were his little sister, don’t you think he’d react in the same way? But without the homophobic nonsense, of course.”

The skater frowned. “I’m not a fucking girl. I can do whatever the fuck I-”

“Of course,” Ville said, and then he let out a laugh that was neither sad nor amused. “But I’m the scary rockstar. He’s probably worried about drugs and STDs, and other things of that nature…”

“Maybe,” the younger one muttered sourly. “But it was still fucking stupid to say all those things in the middle of the fucking family dinner! What an asshole.”

Ville nodded, though slightly amused. “Amen to that, Bammie,” he said, and then he kissed him.
Bam took one look at the skate ramp and climbed it. The noise level rose by more than a few decibels; kids were skateboarding up and down the sloped ramps, crying out for one another in Spanish. They were wild and eager, elbowing their way through the dense crowd of people, and Bam grinned. He thrived on chaos.

Suddenly a young girl appeared from nowhere by waving her hand in front of his nose. She wore a look of annoyance on her face and said something in Spanish, and Bam shook his head.

“Sorry – I’m American,” he said and glanced down, eying the child very carefully. To Bam, she looked about thirteen. Her hair was brown and her eyes were green. What truly caught his attention was the pink scar that ran the length of her left cheek. It looked as though someone had carved it into her flesh with a breadknife. The result was all but pretty; however, it added something to her character. She looked fierce.

The girl rolled her eyes and asked, “You gonna skate, old man?”

“I’ll race you,” he said and lifted an eyebrow, daring her to take the challenge. A vicious grin spread across her face, and she nodded eagerly.

“You gonna lose, bitch,” she spat. “I’m best on skateboard in school!”

Bam’s laugh echoed against the brick walls. He had the same lopsided grin he sported to make people laugh at his antics, and he nodded at the girl. “Let’s rock, bitch,” he retorted smugly. What he had not anticipated was that the child would cheat. Before he could say ‘Random Hero’, the girl was halfway down the ramp.

“Fuck!” he yelled and whizzed down the skate ramp at impressive speed; however, the girl had already won. She waited for him on the other side of the hall, immensely pleased with herself for the less than honorable feat, and a wry smile crept over her face. For a moment, Bam thought she resembled Scar from ‘The Lion King’, cunning and yet vulnerable.

“I win!” she declared and stuck her tongue out at him. “You lose!”

Bam paid her no attention and focused on his skateboard instead. After all, the camera was watching, and he had half a mind to impress her and shut her up while he was at it. An endless procession of gravity-defying tricks and wild stunts followed, and the kids in the park stared at him in wide-eyed surprise. None of them had thought that the old man knew his way around a skateboard.

“Hell yeah!” Bam said to himself and pursed his mouth in a self-satisfied smirk. He dried the wetness from his face and breathed heavily, tasting blood and sweat in his mouth. His oversized tee shirt
clung to his frame, and he was suddenly reminded that it was still winter. When the chill in the air touched his damp skin, his body yearned to snuggle into warm, dry clothing, and as he caught a whiff of himself, he knew he smelled like that homeless guy under the bridge. For an instant, Bam remembered that he was too old for this lifestyle, but when he saw the awed face of every kid there, he was swift to banish the thought.

“You still lose!” the girl shouted at the top of her lungs, forcefully dragging him out of his thoughts.

Bam shrugged. “You broke the rules, kiddo,” he said, and the girl scowled at him. “No one likes a cheater.”

As soon as the words had been said, he felt somewhat uncomfortable. A couple of years ago, he would have challenged her for a second time and humiliated her to the brink of tears. But as he threw a quick glance back at her, he realized that the gentle scolding had affected her more deeply than a crushing defeat. She wore a guilty look on her face, one that said a million words, and Bam felt his heart sink to the pit of his stomach. When had he become the grownup?

Bam sighed and rolled over to his cameraman – William Bloodworth – who was doing his best to keep a straight face. He had caught the reprimand on camera, and Bam doubted that it would go by unnoticed by their colleagues back in the US. William, who had been a fan of Jackass for more than a decade, was surprised to see how Bam had changed, but he said nothing of it.

“You’re doing great, Bam!” William shouted and gave him the thumbs up. “Let’s wrap it up for today!”

Bam angled his skateboard to the ground and pushed off, skating toward William and the camera for a final shot.

“And there,” the younger man said and grinned. “Perfect, just perfect, man.”

The thirty-seven-year-old smiled. “I guess that’s all for today.

“Yeah,” William agreed and shoved the camera into the camera bag for safekeeping. “You’re really improving quite steadily. It’s been a joy to watch,” he commented and sat down on a wooden bench that stood by one of the skateboard ramps. Bam sat down next to him and immediately knew his muscles would be sore in the morning. Time was beginning to take its toll on him. Around ten years ago, he would skate for more than five hours a day and never once feel tired. They had now managed to do around two or three hours a day, and the results were good, though hard-earned.

“It’s been a whole lot easier to stay focused since we came here,” Bam admitted with a huge smile on his lips. It made him look as though he had not changed from the tireless troublemaker he had once been. “Being at home just makes me even lazier.”

“I can imagine. Not everyone lives in a freaking castle,” the blond man teased and then stretched and yawned. Bam guessed that he had been too eager to fall asleep and had worked through the night. He never cut corners.

“So,” Bam said and looked sideways at the younger man with curious amusement twinkling in his eyes, “have you talked to the missus today?”

William wrinkled his forehead at the inquiry. “Uh, no,” he said with a slight frown, but then chuckled. “I even switched off my phone! But she knows me – knows I’m very enthusiastic about my work. I tend to bury myself in it, and I…” His voice trailed off and an undefined emotion flickered across his eyes. “She just isn’t like most women. She understands that I’m very invested in
what I do.”

“Does she have a job?” Bam asked and fished out his own phone. He had a few messages from his mother and then a few from Jess, who was still angry about the divorce, and then some others that were work related. He decided to save them for later, painfully aware that the evening would be long and dull. Whenever he asked William to join him for a cup of coffee or a meal, he would stare at the clock until he could go back to his room and continue editing the film. Bam had given up. “Or she’s a student, maybe?”

“Oh, no, not a student,” the blond said. His lips then curved into a dreamy smile. “She’s a news reporter, actually. Just for a small news channel, but still, she’s doing pretty good.”

William started fumbling for something in his wallet – a picture – and showed it to Bam.

“That’s her, Kim.”

The woman in the picture had short, black hair and a smile that reminded Bam of Audrey Hepburn. She appeared to be a few years older than William, perhaps in her late twenties, and she was slim and gorgeous, though not outlandishly good-looking. Her key attribute was perhaps the natural beauty and brightness that shone through the photograph. Bam realized that William had taken it, because some of that radiant beauty stemmed from endorphins.

“She’s a real looker,” the older man complimented him, and a wistful smile touched his lips. He remembered a time when he too had walked around with a photo in his wallet. It made him feel slightly nostalgic, though with a hint of bitterness. While it had not exactly been a lifetime ago, ten years had passed since it had stopped making sense. In the years that followed, he had kept the picture because of Dunn. It was the last thing he had given him before his untimely demise, and he had perhaps hoped that there was some final wisdom in it.

“You used to be married to that Missy chick, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” Bam laughed. “Man, that was doomed from the start. We had known each other forever, and, well, it just happened.” He scratched his beard and then let out a heavy sigh. “I think she wanted to save me or something like that.” A snort slipped through his lips, and he muttered, “A lot of women are that way, you know? They want to change you and make you into someone you’re not.”

“Not Kim though,” William said and tucked a lock of blond, long hair behind his ear. “She actually wanted to keep things casual between us. I told her that I couldn’t share her – it would’ve been madness! I guess that opened her eyes. We’ve been together for… oh, I don’t know, four years?”

Bam frowned. “And you’re how old?”

“Twenty-three,” he said and, seeing the quizzical look on Bam’s face, laughed. “Yeah, I know, I was a virgin before I met her. I used to be such a loner. Guess she saw the potential before I did! She even pushed me to apply for this job.”

“Sounds like a great girl,” the dark-haired man commented. “Those are rare.”

William nodded. “Yeah. I gather that you haven’t been as lucky?”

“Oh, hell no,” he snorted in disgust, but his expression quickly softened. “But to be fair, it’s been on me. I’m a pretty picky guy.”

“If you keep on being that picky, you’ll have to switch teams!” William teased and threw his head
back and laughed. The joke struck a nerve with the skater, making his skin prickle with embarrassment. He frowned and shook his head, letting out a quiet but firm, “No.”

“I’ve heard the rumors, you know,” the cameraman said, hinting at something, and Bam looked unbearably uncomfortable, shifting around in his seat and glancing down at his shoes. “They mentioned it before I said yes to the assignment – mentioned something about.”

“That little bitch at the skate ramp sure had an attitude problem,” Bam said, cutting him short. “Kinda reminded me of myself at that age.”

For a moment, the two of them remained silent, but then the twenty-three-year-old gave a hearty laugh. “So, to talk about something else…” he started and looked at the brunet with curious eyes. “Why Spain?”

Bam, a little thrown off by the previous topic of conversation, fidgeted, shuffling his feet and rolling his shoulders inside the damp tee shirt. “Why not?” he muttered, but then scratched his beard and looked thoughtful for a moment. “I like traveling,” he said and gave a half shrug. “And to be honest, I was a little bit sick of the mass media and the paparazzi assholes back in the US. They were basically stalking me.”

“That’s the curse of being famous, I guess,” William said and offered Bam an apologetic smile. He had quite obviously decided to ignore the elephant in the room, even if the question was more than ripe enough for the picking. While the skater knew that William chose to remain silent to keep things friendly between them, he still hugely appreciated it. “I promise I won’t write anything bad.”

“Thanks,” Bam said and got up from the bench. He was feeling somewhat restless and cold because of the sweaty clothes he was wearing. “You seem like a good guy. I’m glad to have you on my team. Now, I really need to go and take a shower before I freeze my balls off.”

“Yeah, you do kind of smell like a donkey’s ass,” William joked, scrunching up his nose and waving his hand in front of his face. Bam chuckled a little at the jest.

“I’ve got to stop by a grocery store first, but I’ll see you tomorrow for breakfast, unless you get lost,” the younger man then said.

“Why would I?”

“Oh, I don’t know, dementia?” William said and grinned mischievously. “You’re too old!”

Bam laughed at the inside joke. Every time he had fallen flat on his face because he had lost his balance, he had complained about being too old for skateboarding. As he watched the younger man laughing himself silly, he was hit by a most peculiar sense of nostalgia. William reminded him of Ryan, and whenever he cracked a joke or talked about things he was passionate about, the resemblance became overwhelming.

“I’ll catch up with you later, Willy,” Bam said with a tender smile on his face. “And try to get some sleep tonight!” he added as he waved the blond goodbye and walked toward the hotel. The nostalgic smile would not quite budge.

19:12 p.m.

Bam stood next to a statue of a weeping woman. Bird droppings had dyed her head white, and she looked more embarrassed than grief-stricken. He chuckled to himself and photographed the pitiful
sight, thinking that his Instagram followers would cherish his interest in the finer arts. Comments immediately started ticking in; his smartphone would not stop vibrating. He skimmed through them with mild interest, laughed at a few witty remarks regarding his taste in women, and decided that he should head back to the hotel. The sky was beginning to grow dark and the streets were poorly lit.

As he continued to toddle down the empty street, he heard the unmistakable sound of skateboard wheels screeching against the asphalt. He turned around and saw someone approaching him, slowly and determinedly, and he knew he was being watched. He felt the tingle of eyes on his skin. Swallowing nervously, he considered legging it back to the hotel, but just then a street lamp illuminated the dark figure – a scrawny teenage girl – and Bam noticed a pink scar on the left side of her face. He exhaled sharply.

“Señor!” she called out in a high-pitched voice. “Wait!”

“Are you following me or what?” he asked in a surly voice, still somewhat spooked. “What d’you want, kid?”

“I want say sorry,” she said and cradled the skateboard under her right arm. Bam noticed it had a pink heartagram on it. The word ‘HIM’ stood out in golden, dripping letters. She had obviously painted the logo herself. The moment she understood that the American had noticed it, she smirked in a self-satisfied manner. It made Bam laugh. “I was bitch, as you say,” she added, and her smile grew wider.

“Bitchy,” he corrected her, and she shrugged and rolled her eyes. “You’re a fan?”

“Yes! I watch YouTube, you and Finland.” A flush crept up her face; she kicked dirt clouds with her foot and said, “My brother, Miguel, bought skateboard.” She gazed up and locked eyes with him. “Miguel say I’m like Bam Margera. I hurt myself too.” She touched her scar, telling him a wordless tale of bravado. “Ten needle!”

Bam smiled and did his best not to laugh. “And what’s your name, kiddo?”

“Lucia!” she informed him with childish eagerness and held her hand out. Bam raised an eyebrow, but he took her hand and shook it firmly. Her grip was surprisingly strong.

“Ouch!” he said, and the girl rolled her eyes and feigned annoyance. “Don’t break my fingers!”

“Pussy!” she exclaimed. Amusement sparkled in her green orbs, and Bam melted. He had never enjoyed children, but Lucia was something else. She reminded him of his niece.

“It is dark. I go home,” she then said, and her eyes darkened with disappointment. “Mama worry.”

“Hold on,” Bam muttered. Before the girl could get her feet back on the shabby skateboard, Bam took it from her and inspected it. She narrowed her eyes, well aware that it was a cheap and fickle thing, and awaited his judgement with apprehension.

“The wheels really aren’t good,” he told her and raised one eyebrow. “Here – you better take mine.”

For a moment, Lucia appeared to be holding her breath. Her eyes grew watery, and she shook her head. “No-no,” she refused, but Bam was not blind. He noticed the hungry look in her eyes, and he handed her the skateboard and said, “From one pro to another. Just don’t cheat anymore.”

A mischievous grin spread across her face like butter on a slice of bread. “Yes,” she said and turned the skateboard over. When she saw the HIM logo on the back, she squealed with delight and nearly jumped from one foot to the other. To Bam’s great astonishment, she put her thin arms around him,
hugged him tightly, and whispered, “Thank you”. The feeling was strange, and he was careful not to touch her, afraid that some relative of hers would jump out from a dark alley and beat him to a pulp.

“Take care,” the child – Lucia – said once she had pulled back from the embrace. Her green eyes were filled to the brim with excitement and joy. “And thank you!”

“You too,” he replied softly and watched her as she tried out her new skateboard. In a way, it saddened him, because one skateboard meant nothing to him. He broke them all the time. He guessed that if Lucia were to break hers, her parents would not buy her a new one. As he took this into consideration, his foot brushed against her old skateboard. Bam paused, hesitating, and then leaned down and picked it up from the ground. He knew he had to keep it.

“Shit,” he muttered to himself and watched the sun as it crept down toward the mountains. The clouds resembled rolling waves of pink and orange; the still pale and transparent moon waited patiently for the night. Bam knew the stars would be stronger there, and he let out a sigh and started his trudge down the narrow street toward the hotel. He yearned to get rid of the smelly tee shirt and take a shower.

While walking, his mind began to wander. As he passed the medieval cathedral and marveled at the sight, he frowned and thought about all the beautiful buildings he had passed and ignored over the years. The endless pursuit of fun – of having adrenaline rushing through his veins – had hollowed him out. Now that he was thirty-seven and finally at the brink of adulthood, he felt as though he had missed out on the real fun. Within the blink of an eye, the women, the alcohol and the fame seemed unimportant. It struck him that he would never tell his children or grandchildren about his nightly escapades. He would, however, tell them about the girl with the scar.

A peculiar noise caught his attention, forcing him to abandon his thoughts. He paused for a moment and gazed around, only to realize that the startling sound had been the echoing of his own footsteps. To someone like Bam, who had been a social butterfly all his life, the silence of Cuenca quickly became ear-shattering. Feeling stressed out and nervous, he scurried down the streets, and when he rounded the corner, his eyes were suddenly drawn to a familiar logo on one of the brick walls. It was a heartagram.

“What the heck…” he whispered to himself, his heart pounding furiously in his chest, and as he stepped closer, he saw that the poster said ‘HIM Farewell Tour 2017’. Five familiar faces glared at him with judgmental eyes, demanding answers to questions he had pushed to the back of his mind a long time ago, and he swallowed thickly and said, “Motherfucker.”

Bam turned on his heel and sprinted for the hotel. Depression greeted him as an old friend and quickly consumed him; thoughts of the demon drink became obsessive. Right then and there, he would have tossed out the sobriety coins in exchange for one drop of alcohol. A year would go to waste.

He reached the hotel. Once he entered the door, the receptionist gave him a funny look, bewildered by his disheveled appearance, and Bam greeted her with a flimsy smile that, had he known her, would have given him away. The girl nodded her head and said, “Good evening, sir.”

“Good evening,” he responded quietly and hurried up the stairs. While he lived on the fifth floor, he could not be bothered to wait for the elevator. It would take too long.

Standing before the door, he fumbled for the key and managed to drop it on the floor. He sighed and groaned, and as he closed the door to the suite behind him, he sank to the floor. His body was bereft of all its usual energy; he was shivering due to the sweaty, cold clothes and the sinking feeling in his stomach. HIM marked the beginning and the end of end era, and as he considered this, he came to
the conclusion that his youth would be buried alongside their music. He was old; he was outdated.

Stepping inside the shower, the thirty-seven-year-old studied his naked reflection in the mirror on the opposite side of the room. He had lost count of the numerous tattoos on his skin, and while some of them told tales of their own, others were harder to explain. Some of them would soon become relics, because HIM would be a thing of the past, and so would he. For an instant, he brushed his fingertips against the joined hearts on the inside of his elbow, and then his hand fell to his side. He let out a flustered groan and tore his gaze away from the mirror, forcibly breaking his own chain of thought.

Bam’s stomach churned; an unsettling question came to mind: Why had Element chosen to renew his contract? Did they realize that everyone wanted a glimpse of the fallen star? He shook his head. His life was beginning to resemble a freak show. Everyone wanted to point a finger at him.

He started chewing on his bottom lip. Was he, the once famous daredevil from MTV, reduced to a nobody? Was he pathetic? He wondered if the children back at the skate park thought so – too young to recognize him from the early 2000s – and he felt angry and frustrated. Why had he let the alcohol eat him from the inside out? His mind had gone to pieces, and his body had swelled and rotted. He had become nothing. Was he still that?

Bam gazed up and once again took in the sight of his naked body in the mirror. He cringed.

The man in the mirror was not the fortunate boy from seventeen years ago – no – the man in the mirror was someone who had lost his best friend in a car crash and had used it as an excuse to spiral out of control. He was someone who had married a woman so that he would not have to be alone. He was someone who still depended on his mother to buy him bedsheets, and he was someone who kept looking to the past because his life had been played out on a TV screen half a lifetime ago.

Bam, disheartened and full of self-pity, put on a robe and lumbered back to the small living room of the suite. He sat down in the old-fashioned and undoubtedly expensive armchair and switched on the television, hoping to distract himself with a shitty movie. However, most of the channels were either in Spanish or German, and Bam eventually had to give up on distracting himself from himself.

His attention turned to the minibar, and he opened the door and read the labels carefully. Soon he began fingering the tiny, overprized bottles of vodka. Part of him wanted to succumb to his own despair and his own loneliness, but then he heard his own voice say: ‘I can’t watch you self-destruct anymore’. It echoed through his head again and again, and memories of old flooded his mind.

He remembered when Ville had been in his position. Bam had not understood back then, and not because he had been young and naïve, but because he had been hurt. If Bam drank that bottle of vodka – even just a tiny drop of it – he would hurt everyone who had ever had his back, and he would hurt everyone who had given him a second chance. This thought alone was what caused him to close the door to the minibar shut. He threw himself on the bed and pulled the duvet around his aching, shivering body.

As he made the right decision for himself, he thought of Ville and the decisions he had made in the months prior to the catastrophe. He had promised himself a long time ago to never revisit those nights – to never dip into that pool of lonesomeness and hatred – but times were changing, and not every promise could be kept. He knew that, for the green orbs haunted him. A dark voice whispered hotly against his ear. Bam was sound asleep.
The sky was blue with a few wispy clouds, and Bam, who stood outside the airport and waited for Ville to stride through the exit, enjoyed the warmth of the sun. He hoped the weather would be as perfect for the next couple of weeks, and he hoped that Ville had packed accordingly. However, Finland was not a warm country by any means, and even if the sun shone brightly throughout the summer nights, the temperatures were still freezing. If Bam knew Ville half as well as he thought he did, the Finn would show up in his usual uniform of black, black and more black. His hood would be pulled over his head and he would wear a beanie hat underneath.

As he chuckled at the mental images of Ville in his usual attire, he spotted a dark figure shambling out of the terminal building. He came to a halt outside the parking lot, removed his huge sunglasses, and scanned the area for the unmistakable monstrosity of a car.

“Willa!” Bam shouted and waved his hand at the Finn. “Over here!”

The Finn, who normally had an arrogant and elegant strut about him when he walked, now lumbered awkwardly across the parking lot. Bam recognized the black button-down shirt and jeans, but over the last few months, they appeared to have become a world too large for him. They now hung on his slender limbs in a baggy fashion and made him look like a scarecrow swaying in the wind. He was struck, however, not so much by Ville’s thinness and tousled hair, but by the sunken and lifeless eyes.

“… Hey,” Bam said once the Finn had made his way over to the red Hummer. “You look-”

“Sorry,” he said, and his eyes darkened. He ran a bony hand through his hair, further disheveling it. “The album – I haven’t slept. Haven’t eaten.”

Bam frowned. “What?”

“The bloody idiots couldn’t make a simple decision without me,” he huffed and rolled his eyes. Then, as soon as the curse had fallen from his lips, he averted his eyes, shifting his gaze to his feet in an attempt to avoid the look of concern on Bam’s face.

“Sorry,” he whispered whimsically, and as their eyes locked in a stare, Ville enfolded Bam with his arms, holding him tight, afraid that he would slip through his fingers. A long moment of silence followed, and Bam buried his face in Ville’s neck. He reeked of alcohol and cigarettes, though he made no comment. Knowing Ville, he had poured all his energy into the album and the work that came with it. Chores, such as washing the piles of dirty laundry or cooking nutritious meals, would sink into oblivion. While he should be angry, or at the very least annoyed, he could not find it in his heart to do anything but smile forgivingly.

“Jeez, Willa,” he said in a caring tone of voice. “Stop apologizing – you’re making my head spin! And I know they’re always on your back about something – but hey, what can you do? Guess they trust you to make the best decisions.” He stroked his hand down Ville’s back. “I don’t blame ‘em.”

Ville withdrew from the embrace. “Yeah,” he said and heaved a sigh. “I’m sorry, love. I haven’t been myself.”

“We’ve got a few weeks to fix that,” Bam teased good-naturedly, and Ville smirked.

“How do you intend to do that, Mr. Margera?” he asked with a hint of mischief to his voice. Bam winked playfully, and for a delightful moment, Ville forgot his every sorrow.

“Like this,” Bam said quietly and brushed his lips against Ville’s. His heart skipped a beat when Ville sighed contentedly and leaned in, deepening the kiss. As their tongues brushed together, they
both forgot that they were making out in a parking lot. They both forgot that Ville stank of alcohol, sweat and cigarettes.

“… I’ve missed you,” the eldest of the two men murmured breathlessly against the younger’s lips; they had tasted faintly of chocolate with a hint of mint flavored toothpaste. “Gods, Bammie. I’ve missed you.”

“Let’s go home,” the short-haired man said, voice aquiver. “I’ll draw you a bath. You smell like a skunk.”

Ville, to Bam’s surprise, snorted slightly with laughter. He made a show of smelling his armpit and then frowned. “Alright. I guess I agree,” he said and laughed some more. Bam pressed another kiss to his lips, still not entirely put off by the stench.

As they drove back to the house, Ville closed his eyes and listened to the endless stream of conversation that poured out from Bam’s mouth. He hummed every now and then, whispering ‘yes’ and ‘ah’ whenever Bam paused, though he paid little attention to what was being said. Bam knew, and he chuckled as he noticed how Ville would jerk awake every other second, and for about ten minutes, he resisted the temptation to fall asleep. In the end, his eyelids became too heavy and he dozed off. Soft snores erupted from his nostrils every now and then, and Bam’s heart swelled with affection. He had missed those snores.

Once they had parked the Hummer outside Castle Bam, people emerged from every nook and cranny of the vast property. Bam stepped outside the car and was greeted by Ryan and Novak, both of whom were sweating profusely under the glare of the sun.

“He’s out cold?” Ryan asked, raising one brow as he peered inside the car.

Bam smiled. “Like a light.”

“Is he alright?” the ginger inquired with a frown on his face. He studied the skeletal man through the windshield intently, swimming in his oversized clothes and with messy, unkempt hair. His complexion was ashen, and dark half half-moons hung under his eyes. “He looks like a fucking corpse.”

Novak, who also had his eyes set on Ville, cleared his throat and said, “Is he on heroin?”

Bam rolled his eyed. “No, he isn’t on fucking heroin, you dipshit. I-”

The ear-splitting volume of loud, fast music suddenly pierced through the air like gunfire, cutting Bam short. HIM’s music blasted out of the speakers, and Ville, who was rudely awakened by the sound of his own voice, let out a small yelp and slammed his head against the headliner. The three men guffawed loudly at the sight, and Ville, completely red due to embarrassment and shock, jumped out of the car and slammed the door shut.

“What-the-hell?” he asked, placing his right hand on his hip in a feminine manner. “Bam!”

Bam let out another laugh, but covered it with a cough and said, “Sorry, man. That was fucking priceless.”

Ville wrinkled his forehead. “Whatever,” he grumbled, and the three men stopped laughing.

“Uh,” Bam said and scratched his chin. “Willa – the guys and I just wanted to throw you a party.” He paused and put his hand on Ville’s shoulder. “We’ve missed having you around. Well, I’ve missed having you around.”
The Finn melted at the kind words, and his stern expression visibly softened. “I’m just completely exhausted, darling,” he whispered and raked his fingers through his own dark locks, only to find that he had not washed his hair in a week or two. It had become a greasy, tangled mess. The discovery made him scrunch up his nose, disgusted by his own appearance, and as Bam smiled and cupped his face in his hands, Ville looked more than a little defeated.

“D’you want a beer or something?” Bam asked, withdrawing his hand. “You look like you could use a drink.”

“And a bath!” Novak said and waved his hand in front of his face. He was clearly joking, but they all knew there was some truth to it. They all smelled it.

“Says the junkie,” Bam shot back. “God knows the last time you were clean.”

“Man, Bam.” Novak shook his head and laughed, completely untouched by the brunet’s comment. “Even the hoes I bang don’t smell half that bad – even their assholes don’t smell half that bad!”

“That’s quite enough, thank you very much, Novak,” Ville said, rolling his eyes at the man whose biggest accomplishment in life was being Bam’s friend.

“Yeah, unless you prefer being homeless.” Bam’s tone was mocking, but his eyes were dead serious. The threat worked like a charm; Novak held his hands up in surrender and chuckled.

“Fine. Sorry, Ville. I bet your ass smells like flowers, even after a twelve-hour flight.”

“Good,” Bam said and pushed Novak forcefully in the shoulder, which caused him to lose his balance and fall flat on his ass.

“Hey!” he protested. “I wanna get paid for that shit.”

“You live here for free,” Ryan pointed out and pulled on him roughly, trying to drag him back on his feet, but the junkie eventually gave up and sprawled his limbs out on the grass. “Might as well lie here for a while,” he said and looked at the starry canvas of the sky. “Man, those stars are huge.”

“High much?” Ryan asked, rolling his eyes at the childlike man. When he turned his attention back to Bam, he quickly realized that he had become the third wheel. They were lost in each other’s eyes. Ville’s hand rested on Bam’s neck, his thumb stroking up and down the sensitive skin there, and Ryan coughed and said, “I’ll – uh, I’ll go find Angie.”

“Sure,” Bam whispered, not really paying attention. The bearded man smiled politely and walked toward the pool, glad to get away from the star-crossed lovers. While he would gladly admit to being fond of Ville, he would never get used to seeing him and Bam kissing and touching one another. It was too graphic.

Ville, in spite of his tiredness, sighed contentedly and said, “Thank you, Bammie.” The skater grinned.

“Now, let’s go get you that beer, babe,” he offered and suddenly grabbed the musician’s hand, entwining their fingers together. The touch felt electric.

“… Sure,” the Finn agreed, though without any real enthusiasm. “A beer sounds heavenly.”

“Awesome!”

The older man willed a small smile to his lips; it was all but sincere. His eyes were bleary, and he just
wanted to close them and go back to sleep. Because of the album and the tiresome process of recording and editing it, he was completely worn out. Bam was not blind; he saw how the flawless face had become haggard with exhaustion; he sensed how his energy had evaporated. At the same time, he thought that a beer could not hurt. Ville was there to unwind, and Ville could not unwind without alcohol.

22:46 p.m.

Ville was drunk and hiccupping. Bam had carried him to bed a couple of hours ago, though he had not been able to fall asleep. As he lay in bed, marveling at the cleanliness of the sheets, he watched the stars and thought about the Finnish summer he had run away from. He thought about the flat he had run away from. Dirty plates stood on the dining table, moldy fruit awaited him in the fridge, there were empty bottles everywhere, and all his clothes were smelly and two sizes too large.

There was a knock on the door. Bam stood in the doorway and watched him, and Ville squeezed his eyes shut and hoped Bam would leave him alone.

“You good, Willa?” Bam asked. When no answer was give, he added, “I know you're not asleep.” Ville always snored, especially when he had been drinking heavily. After a bottle of vodka and a few beers, the blue-eyed man knew that his head was spinning.

“Yeah.” Ville’s lips twitched as he attempted to smile. “No,” he whispered as soon as he realized that he could not feign a smile in his current state. “I’m… no. I’m not fine.”

“Oh,” the skater said and furrowed his brows. “Why’s that?”

Ville licked his dry lips and said, “Because I’m scared, Bammie. I’m terrified.”

Bam sat down on the bed and put his arms around the older man’s slender frame. As he buried his face in his unruly mane of dark, umber brown hair, he was reminded of the personal hell he had suffered through in Finland. Ville was the heart and brain of the band; every responsibility fell on him, and when Ville became overwhelmed by the heavy workload, he began to wither away.

“Why?” Bam asked and pressed a kiss to the side of his face. “You’ve got me. I’ll take care of you,” he said, attempting to reassure him that he would never be alone. “Any way you want.” He grinned against his cheek, tickling him. “If you know what I mean.”

A soft chuckle came from the Finn’s mouth. He tilted his head, only slightly, and captured Bam’s lips. It was chaste and sweet, and as he pulled back and gazed into the younger man’s blue orbs, he whispered, “I know,” and then shook his head and sighed. “It isn’t that – it’s me,” he admitted. “I’m all kinds of fucked up.”

Bam gave him a quizzical look. “So, you’re saying I’m not half as fucked up as you are?”

Ville laughed, though it angered him. Laughter did not belong.

“Bam,” he whined and turned around, his back now pressed against Bam’s abdomen. “No more jokes, okay?”

“Fine,” the skater said, rolling his eyes at the melodrama. With as much tenderness as he could muster, he caressed his lover’s arm and back. “So,” he said, hesitating, “why are you so ‘fucked up’?”
Ville’s eyes filled with tears, tears he fought back with all his might, and he said, “I’m not – I’m not who you think I am, Bammie.” He paused and choked back a sob. “I-I… I’m just… I’m nothing… a fucking nobody, Bam… that’s who you’re with – a nobody.”

“Willa,” the blue-eyed man whispered through teeth that were clenched tightly together. “You couldn’t be farther away from the truth, okay? Stop spewing out shit like that – that’s why you’re feeling down!”

“… B-Bam…” he sobbed and then rolled over; they lay face to face and gazed into each other’s eyes for the millionth time. As Bam dipped into luminous green orbs rimmed with silver threads, he felt his heart shrivel into a raisin. Tears streaked down the singer’s white face, and his lower lip bled from where his front tooth had punctured the skin. He realized he was not being melodramatic.

“… Hey,” Bam said and cradled his cheek in his hand. “What’s going on? I’m sorry for being such an insensitive ass – I just didn’t know you were this out of it.”

Ville bit down on his lower lip again. More blood oozed from the small wound, and he winced. “I-I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” he whispered hoarsely and averted his gaze. “I just… back home… I couldn’t take care of myself. I just couldn’t. Couldn’t get myself to do any of the laundry – couldn’t put the plates in the goddamn dishwasher.” A shadow of apprehension and self-doubt crossed his features, and he whispered, “All I ever did was drink. All the time, Bam.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t stop.”

“Sounds like me,” Bam said and offered the singer an encouraging smile. “You’ve been busy, Willa.”

“Not that busy,” the Finn argued. “No – I had time. I just couldn’t get out of bed-”

“You were overworked, love,” the skater said, trying his best to reason with him. Ville had always been highly critical of himself, and if he failed to do something or had a lazy day, he would beat himself up over it. “You were stressed out of your fucking mind, and everyone kept pestering you. It’d be weird if you didn’t react that way.” He paused, once again smiling one of those boyish, careless smiles of his. Ville felt the nervous anguish seeping out of his body. The smile eased his pain.

“Look, Willa…” Bam said, brushing his fingertips against the bared skin of his torso. “You’re strong and talented, and you’re allowed to be lazy every now and then, especially when life’s being a whiny bitch.”

Ville sighed, annoyed with his lover for not grasping the gravity of his situation. Even so, he felt tempted to let go of his annoyance and melt into his touch. He had yearned to lie next to him and feel the gentle caress of his hands; the warmth of his being spreading through the sheets and thawing the frost away.

“Bam,” he murmured and snuggled up closer, burying his face in Bam’s tee shirt. “It’s not laziness.”

The skater’s lips grazed his skin lightly as he whispered, “You’ll feel better tomorrow,” into his ear. Ville drew in a deep, shuddering breath. “I promise,” he added. Ville started nibbling on his lower lip again.

“No,” the Finn said in a firm tone of voice. Over the last few months, his mind had grown darker and darker. In the end, his thoughts had reached a new low. He had thought the unthinkable, and he had considered things that now, being in Bam’s company, seemed pathetic and farfetched. It would have been easy to let go of it, to pretend that all was fine and dandy, but the moment he went back to
Finland, his life would be the same gray stretched canvas.

He drew in a long breath and said, “I think… I think I’m depressed. I think I should get h…” he faltered, feeling as though the last bit of his courage leaked from his heart. He closed his eyes and said the words over and over in his mind, but his tongue would not move; his lips would not part.

“Willa… talk to me.” Bam’s caressed his cheek, his eyed begging him to continue. Ville felt his mouth go dry, but he knew that silence would get him nowhere. “I-I don’t know… Bammie,” he finally stuttered, “… I think should – I should talk to someone and get help.” He closed his eyes. “Treatment.”

For a couple of seconds, they were both quiet. Bam stroked down the older man’s back and tried to soothe him with his presence. Thousands of thoughts flickered through his mind, and he considered Ville’s obsession with perfectionism. He considered his anxiousness and his tendency to take on too many responsibilities. His anxiety kicked in every now and then; however, it had never lingered for more than a few weeks at a time, and he had always gotten better.

“Nah,” he whispered and kissed his forehead, pulling him closer. “Willa, you’re the strongest person I know. You’re just stressed out – that’s what I think. And after a couple of weeks of doing nothing with me, you’ll feel better.” He chuckled. “You’ll probably feel pretty psyched about going back to Finland and the guys.”

“Yeah,” the Finn whispered. “I guess you’re right.”

“… And Willa?”

“Mm?”

“Please take a shower.”
Paradise Lost and Revisited

Chapter Notes

Well, better late than never? Anyways, enjoy. This one is a bit dark and there's a lot of fear and guilt going on.

I hope I can get a grip and post more regularly from now on :) And like always, I appreciate the comments <3 They make me more eager to post, haha.

09:22 p.m. 28.02.2017

Bam awoke to find the streets covered in a blanket of crispy, white snow. A sense of deep melancholy settled in his joints, and as he sat in the restaurant area and sipped on his morning coffee, he could not divert his thoughts from the past. Dangerous memories danced before his mind’s eye. He held in a sigh and absently chewed on his bottom lip, his eyes staring blankly at the newspaper. He pictured snow-covered city streets, frost-rimmed eyelashes, and that rich, silky voice of his beloved.

“More coffee, sir?” a waiter asked, startling him back to reality.

“Oh, yeah,” Bam said and straightened up in his seat. “Thanks.”

“Too bad it’s snowing today,” the waiter commented and poured him another cup of hot, black gold. “It isn’t too common around here. Too bad,” he repeated, though he smiled. “Have a good day, sir.”

“You too,” Bam muttered and drank some more coffee. It was too hot and burned his tongue, but he swallowed it nonetheless and felt the hotness as it trickled down his gullet. Coughing, he put the cup down on the table and gazed out the window. He watched the world outside with doleful blue eyes and exhaled a sigh caught somewhere in between wistful and dreamy. The sound of hushed conversations, and the occasional clink and rattle of the dinnerware, faded into oblivion. Before him, the tiniest snowflakes floated whimsically through the air and merged with the whiteness of the streets. Everything was clean.

A frown appeared between his brows. Realization dawned on him. He wetted his lips and hummed. The snow-clad cityscape reminded him of the frostbitten capital that had once served as his second home. While half a lifetime had gone by since, he could still recall the taste of the cheap vodka, Ville’s breath mints, and the orange cloudberries that tasted of the moorlands. He closed his eyes and imagined the cabin by the lake. The sauna. Birch firewood. The feel of Ville’s eyelashes against his cheek. Their breaths mingled together. Fingertips brushing against blushing skin. Mouth on mouth. The sound of Ville moaning, and then the sudden and brief moment of ecstasy, so all-consuming the world outside the cabin simply ceased to exist. Ville as he said, ‘I love you, Bam-Bam’, and pressed his lips to his throat, which had tickled and they had laughed. Finally, the quietude as the night enveloped them. Hours of deep sleep, their limbs tangled together, and then finally, the crispy, white snow and a pale morning sun.

Someone gently touched his shoulder. “… Bam?”
He jumped, surprised, and the loud clatter of silverware resonated from his corner of the hotel restaurant. The room went very quiet. Bam muttered swearwords under his breath.

“… William,” he eventually said and offered the blond a brief smile. “Good morning.”

“Are you alright?”

“… Yeah,” Bam said and noticed that he had spilled coffee on his shirt. He groaned inwardly. That was his last clean shirt. “I was caught off guard,” he explained. “Sorry.”

The cameraman sat down on the opposite side of the small table. Bam, who was busy cleaning his shirt with a napkin, said, “Let’s take a snow day.”

“Sure,” the younger man replied. “Kim wanted to Skype with me anyways.” He let out a low chuckle and added with a smirk, “Said she’s got ‘something special in store’ for me.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“She’s fun,” William said, his voice full of tenderness. “It’s hard to be apart.”

“… I bet.”

The skater broke into a smile, but then, as soon as the smile had touched his lips, his eyes glazed over and the smile died. When he turned his head back toward the window, something dark flashed across his face – something vile – and he laughed. The sound was raw and specked with bitter resentment. William, utterly confused by the sudden outburst, furrowed his brow in concern. Bam’s eyes, frostbitten and cold, were drawn to the plate and the dirty napkin.

“What’s wrong?” William asked quietly, his eyes both warm and sincere. “Are you sick?”

Again, the dark-haired man cast a searching glance out the window. It no longer snowed; it rained. The sight was a miserable one. The pure, white snow had melted into brown puddles. Due to the wind, it rained sideways, and people ran across the street with their jackets and scarves over their heads, hoping to shield themselves from the wrath of the season.

“I’m gonna head back to my room,” Bam said, willing a smile to his lips. “I think I need some time to myself.”

“Um, sure,” the younger man said in an uncertain tone of voice; however, the moment Bam rose from his chair, the wooden legs screeching against the tiled floors, William got up and followed him toward the lobby.

“Bam,” he called out, though his voice was drowned out by the loud conversations of hotel guests. Bam, who was walking determinedly across the room to the elevator, completely ignored him. William walked faster, and just before the doors closed, he stuck his foot inside. When the doors opened again, the thirty-seven-year-old raised a brow and moved to the side, allowing the blond to walk inside the small space and press the button to the third floor. For a moment, neither of the two said a word. Bam, who felt very confused, watched the younger man out of the corner of his eye.

“… You’ve got to tell me,” William said quietly and without making eye contact. “Okay?”

“Huh?”

“You’ve got to tell me what’s going on.”
Bam bit his lower lip and shook his head defiantly, but as the cameraman offered him a sympathetic look, he felt the masculine façade falling apart. Swallowing thickly, he shook his head and whispered, “Fine.”

The elevator stopped with a groan; the doors opened. William stepped outside the small space, but as he gazed back, he found that Bam had not moved an inch. He stood frozen against the mirrored wall, staring at the blond, wide-eyed and unsure. Instead of offering an explanation, he closed his eyes and shook his head again. An overwhelming, nauseating and dizzying feeling overcame him – paralyzed him – and William, confused as he was, stepped back inside and put his hand on Bam’s shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“It’s alright,” William said, and Bam, who had never told William much about his personal life, somehow believed the reassuring words. Even if William knew nothing, he wanted to believe his words.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, averting his eyes. “I guess.”

“Come on, Bam.”

Looking up from the floor, Bam gazed into gentle blue eyes and shuddered. At times, the resemblance between William and Ryan was uncanny to the point where it outmaneuvered him, always taking him by surprise. The memories poured over him in a deluge. Pictures of Ryan flickered through his brain like fireflies in the dark. The ache of longing – of yearning – was a dull knife hacking through his mind. He remembered the never-ending laughs; the wild jokes; the friendship that had weathered every storm. It had, however, not defeated death, and Bam, who had long been haunted by the green-eyed ghost, wanted to scream and punch the walls until his knuckles became bloody and raw. How long would the ghosts of memory continue to stalk him?

“Are you coming?”

“Uh,” Bam said, soothed by how William’s voice was his own entirely. “Yeah.” He shook his head, resigned, and followed William toward the hotel room. Ryan, for all that he was dead, was everywhere. It could not be helped.

As they walked down the corridor, Bam’s gaze dwelt on the inky blue shirt and the blond hair of the man whose eyes did not belong to him, and when he turned around, he tilted his head to the side, his wavy locks falling sideways from his eyes.

“You have to use your key card,” he commented when Bam became too far gone to act on his own.

“Yeah.” Bam fumbled for the card and unlocked the door. “There.”

Once inside the spacious suite, William sat down on the couch and asked, “What’s going on?”

“I…” Bam scratched the back of his head and drew his lower lip between his teeth. His eyes fell on the coffee table in front of William. Shame transformed his face. “I didn’t drink any of it;” he said quietly and buried his face in his hands, letting out a dejected groan. “I really didn’t… I just – I…”
He fell silent for a moment, unsure of how to explain the glass of wine and the empty bottle next to it. Both the wine and the excuses were telltale signs of a relapse. “I don’t even fucking know.”

“Okay,” William said and raised one eyebrow. “Why is it open, then?”

“… I had to pretend,” Bam whispered and sank into the armchair, looking small and tired, sensing the younger man’s thoughts. He did not blame him for reaching the conclusion any sane man would have reached. “I had to – I didn’t want to be alone.”
“You really aren’t making much sense,” the blond said and got up from the couch, hastily removing the bottle and the glass, hoping it would help Bam forget. He strode with quick steps to the kitchenette in the corner of the room and poured the pricey wine down the sink. Once it was gone, he turned around and fixed his boss with a look, a mixture of concern and confusion, and asked, “What do you mean you had to ‘pretend’?”

The skater, whose eyes were tinged with disappointment, emitted a sound of frustration. He started running his hands up and down his thighs, and he muttered, “Willa,” very quietly.

The younger man’s eyes widened at the mention of the Finn. He stared at the brunet with his mouth hanging open, unable to come up with an appropriate response. The skater smiled ruefully. It was one of those smiles that reminded William of the uphill journey of Bam’s adult life, though he had revealed little about his past. His fall from grace had already been broadcasted on television, chopped up and fed to the hungry vultures as though completely insignificant pieces of garbage, but he had still managed to cling to a last fragment of dignity. William wondered if he had kept Ville a secret to protect him or to protect himself from the venomous rumors, but it made no difference, not at that point. All that mattered now was that Bam was willing to talk about it.

“I know you know,” Bam said, and William could detect hesitancy and fear in his voice, but also relief; it was so palpable he could almost taste it. “And I don’t give a fuck – not anymore – so don’t lie.” Again, that pained smile. “I’ve got too many liars in my life as it is. Used to be one of them myself, so I can tell.”

“I wasn’t going to lie to you,” the blond said, somewhat taken aback. “I’d never-”

“No,” Bam agreed. “But let’s not beat about the bush anymore.”

William, who now stood by the door, leaned his back against the doorframe. He nodded in agreement and said, “Whatever you need, Bam.”

The skater let out a harsh breath and scratched on a random stain on his jeans. He remembered that it was blood, having scratched his knee on the asphalt during practice the other day. His knee still hurt; the jeans were still dirty. Without April there to look after him, it took him ages to do the laundry. It annoyed him.

“I was in a relationship with Willa for about a year,” Bam admitted without making eye contact. Instead, he kept his eyes anchored on a random spot above William’s head. “But we had been friends for five or six years before that, and I guess I was too young to understand what was going on.” A smile tugged at his lips. He remembered the affectionate friendship between him and Willa, and his cheeks reddened as he realized how peculiar it must have seemed to his friends at the time. “I guess everyone but me knew that I was gay for him. That’s the sad truth of it.”

William smiled, biting the insides of his cheeks to hold back laughter. “I can see why. You don’t strike me as gay at all though,” he eventually replied, and Bam rolled his eyes, though good-humoredly.

“I’m not gay,” he said in a stern tone of voice. “But I was gay for him.”

William, whose eyes still shone with mirth, said, “Yeah, I understand,” while struggling not to laugh. Bam was a lot of things, but eloquent? Not in the slightest.

Bam leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I loved him,” he continued, now nervously nibbling on his bottom lip. His face clouded over in thought, signaling that the words were painful to voice, though he soldiered on and whispered, “I’ll never stop loving him either, because he’s the
only person I’ve said those words to and truly meant them.” He took a deep breath, rubbing a hand over his eye. Grief, the kind that sears the soul, blurred his vision. “It’s just him.”

The blond, whose thoughts immediately went to Kim, exhaled sharply. “What happened?”

Bam shrugged, eyes now glued to the window and the gray world outside. The rain still whipped the ground mercilessly. He rolled the word around in his mouth – mercilessly – and remembered the closing scenes of their relationship. Had his alcoholism been the cruel irony of life? Bam supposed it was karma, though he did not particularly believe in it. Sniffling, he dried the wetness from his cheeks and nose with the back of his hand. William offered him a handkerchief, but he shook his head.

“I was a spoiled brat, you know?” he said in a voice thick with guilt. “I thought I could treat people like shit because I had never lost anyone I cared about.” He shook his head, miserable, and he looked both tired and small, his eyes sunken and his body thin. Bam, in spite of his athleticism, was short in stature and stood no taller than five feet eight inches, and after the strict fitness regime, he had little body fat left. What he lacked in height and width, he normally made up for in sheer sturdiness and liveliness, but now? It was as if the night had taken a toll on him, transforming him into an old man.

“I thought it’d last forever no matter what I did,” he whispered. “And I thought he owed me something, you know? I thought that his problems weren’t important – he had hurt me. I didn’t even see that I had hurt him just as much.”

“Well, that’s…”

“Stupid,” Bam finished for him in a weak voice, though it was not said without a hint of self-irony. “I guess I was destined to make a mess of it all – the only real relationship I’ve had – and that’s where my life started to deteriorate. Where it went straight to hell.” He wrinkled his forehead, years of torment suddenly visible on his face. “Ryan was just the cherry on top.”

Silence followed, both men thoughtful as they gazed at one another, and then Bam added mournfully, “I wished it could’ve been me instead, ‘cause Ryan deserved better. He had a life – people who loved him. People he loved.”

“… You didn’t drink and drive though,” the blond was swift to point out, surprised that Bam could say such a thing. “He did, and he crashed.”

Bam let out a strangled laugh. “You think I never did the same?”

William pressed his lips together in a thin line. The question silenced him.

“Well, I’m not fucking proud.” Bam muttered, running a hand through his ruffled, short hair. “We all thought we were invincible – in control – and of course we weren’t. We were idiots.” He shook his head, disgusted with himself and his coworkers. All of them had nearly dropped out of high school, uninterested in academic pursuits or office jobs, and the fact that they had managed to make a name for themselves had been a huge feat. But their success, as with all good things in Bam’s life, had been fleeting. They had ruined everything by getting hooked on drugs and alcohol.

“I’ll be honest about one thing though,” he began to say, his face taking on an annoyed look, and he got up from the chair and started pacing. “I didn’t really drink before Willa entered my life, him and those Finnish motherfuckers. Before that, and before my career took off, I had to stay fit, so I couldn’t really drink.”

William frowned. “Well, no one forced you to pour alcohol down your throat, Bam.”
“I was young and stupid,” Bam repeated, bitterness seeping into his voice. “Willa knew that. He knew I’d chicken out.” Barely contained anger smoldered in his tired blue eyes. His hands clenched into tight fists, and his body trembled with rage. William said nothing, he merely watched.

“Wish I wasn’t like this,” the skater mumbled once the old resentfulness had evaporated. It was swiftly replaced by sorrow, which struck him like lightning. Tears started welling up in his eyes, and while he quickly brushed them away with the sleeve of his shirt, William had already seen them.

“It’s okay to be sad, Bam,” William said in a soft tone of voice. “Time heals.”

Bam shook his head. He considered the hollowed out heart hidden within his ribcage and laughed miserably. Had time healed anything besides his broken bones, he would have been the healthiest and happiest man alive. “I hope you won’t ever have to deal with anything like this,” Bam said, and he somehow pitied William for his youth. He pitied him and he envied him. “You’re even younger than I was when all that crap happened.”

Emotions flickered across William’s face. Bam had hit a nerve. “I lost my mother in a car crash when I was twelve,” he said suddenly, looking down at his shoes. “Or, well,” he muttered under his breath and gazed into Bam’s red-rimmed eyes. “I guess she killed herself. She drove into a truck.”

Bam paled. “Shit,” he whispered. “Now I feel like a total dick. Which I am, by the way.”

“Don’t think about it,” the blond said, his expression revealing little about his state of mind. “I didn’t tell you to make you feel bad.”

“Well,” the brunet mumbled while scratching the back of his neck, “why?”

William shrugged. “I guess what I learned from it is to love life like you’ll lose it tomorrow.” He stilled for a couple of seconds, licking his lips. “Or someone,” he added. “It’s just easy to take the small things for granted, like having a job, or a girlfriend.” Again, he shrugged. “It’s sad that humans only care about something once it’s gone. Same with people.”

“Yeah,” Bam breathed, overwhelmed by a myriad different of emotions, and slumped back down into the chair. As he regarded the blond, taking in the youthful face, he smiled thinly. He reminded him so terribly of someone from his past.

“Hey, didn’t you have a cam date?”

William’s eyes widened. “Oh, shit,” he muttered under his breath and fished his phone out of his pocket. “Phew, I’ve still got half a minute before she calls me,” he said jokingly, and then, as he remembered the promise she had made, he blushed. “I, uh, I need to get ready – um, is it okay if I-”

“Just go,” Bam said, struggling not to laugh. When William gave him a questioning look, he said, “Seriously, I’ll be fine. You don’t have to baby me. Wasn’t really in the job description, was it?”

The blond nodded, but he still offered him an apologetic smile. “Alright then. See you later.”

Once the door had closed with a soft thud, Bam walked to the bathroom and searched for something in his toilet-case. After a minute or two, he finally found what he had been looking for – his sobriety coins – and weighed them in the palm of his hand. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing away fresh tears, and then walked over to the rubbish bin, disposing of the coins one by one. For each clang, he flinched, utterly miserable and ashamed.

The coins were all gone. He lumbered over to the bedroom and sat down on the bed, pulling the duvet over his head. He never should have said those things, laying his sole bare – and why?
William was cut from the same cloth as Ryan. Both were mild, hilarious and wise souls. They were easy to talk to. Bam knew it was idiotic to tell a near stranger about the most intimate, painful time of his life; however, it was equally idiotic to keep it all to himself until he nearly fell off the edge of the world and plunged back into the depths of his addiction.

“Stupid cunt, Walo,” he grumbled angrily. “Stupid fucking cunt.”

Of course, Ville did not deserve to be called by such a name. If anyone deserved it, it was Bam himself.

The sun fell in through the curtains of the bedroom. Ville had his head lolled to one side, mouth open, eyes blinking weakly. His headache was thunderous, and he groaned his misery and struggled to come to terms with the daylight that trickled in through the windows. He tried to clear his throat, but his mouth was dry and his throat felt like sandpaper. A strange sound came from his lips, half a cough and half a choke, and he worried that he might vomit.

“… Willa?”

The Finn froze. As he gazed up and saw Bam standing in the doorway, he forced a sugary smile to his lips and greeted him with a nod. “Bam,” he croaked, and then he coughed and thought about legging it to the bathroom.

“Here,” Bam said and handed him a glass of water. The look on his face was one he had worn often over the last two weeks. He frowned and bit the inside of his cheek, and his handsome features were marred by the uneasiness that coiled in his stomach. Every morning was the same. Ville would be a spitting image of death, bone white skin, thin as a toothpick and red-eyed, and Bam would stand by their bed with a glass of water.

“How’s the head?” the blue-eyed man asked, raising his voice only slightly, and Ville flinched.

“Ouch,” he said and rubbed his temples, trying to alleviate the pressure. “Sorry,” he then mumbled and finished the glass of water in one gulp. It felt clean and fresh as it trickled down his gullet.

“… Maybe we should stay sober today?” Bam asked, and Ville glared at him.

“What do you mean?” he asked, and his voice was raw and aggressive. “I don’t need to ‘stay sober’ – I’m on vacation.”

“Willa,” Bam sighed. “Don’t get angry-”

“Don’t tell me how to feel!” Ville snapped and pulled the duvet aside, revealing his pale and meager body, which seemed transparent in the sunlight. His ribs jutted out; his cheeks were hollow. “I just want to unwind,” he mumbled sourly and started putting on his skinny jeans, though they no longer fit him. Had it not been for the belt, they would have fallen into a heap around his ankles. “I certainly don’t want to argue about my drinking habits – you have no idea how it’s been.”

Bam chuckled. “Don’t I?”

Ville put his hand on his hip and said, “I slept on a dirty old couch in the studio for a month. Couldn’t get a moment to myself. There were photoshoots, interviews, listening sessions, meetings…” He became unfocused, as though he had remembered something important, and he sent
the bathroom door a lingering look.

“It’s not really unusual, Willa,” Bam argued. “I mean, you’ve been doing this for more than ten years – what the hell has changed?”

The singer gave a mirthless laugh. As he moved closer, Bam took a few steps backwards. His reaction caused Ville to raise an eyebrow, and he asked, “What, are you afraid of me?”

“No.” For a second, the skater remained silent and watched the various emotions that flickered across the singer’s face. When he made a second attempt at coming closer, Bam backed away. He shook his head.

“You smell, Walo.”

“Excuse me?”

They now stood face to face; Bam had been cornered. As they stood there and awkwardly stared at one another, unsure of how to proceed, Bam put his hand on Ville’s chest and felt the muscle within. The uneven rhythm brought tears to his eyes, but he refused to acknowledge them. When he looked up, he saw that Ville’s face was pale, and there were shadows under his eyes. For every day that went by, the dark semicircles grew bigger and blacker.

“You smell worse than Novak did when he was still selling himself on the streets,” Bam muttered, angry with the older man for being reckless. “And you look like you’ve been dead for a month. What the hell is wrong with you, man?” he demanded, pushing Ville away; however, his attempt had been half-hearted, and the Finn still towered over him. “Get a grip!”

Ville, who was rendered speechless by the harsh insults, let out a nervous laugh. He was about to come with a clever response, but to his astonishment, Bam put his arms around him and hugged him. It knocked the wind from his lungs and melted his anger, and as they held each other, he could practically feel Bam’s despair radiating from him.

“Ape’s made us waffles for breakfast,” he whispered as a peace offering. “There’s coffee too.”

Ville felt nauseated. He pressed his lips together into a firm line and said, “I’ll just have some coffee.”

Bam’s eyes darkened. “You have to eat,” he said, voice firm and pleading at the same time. “You’re so thin – it’s not fucking healthy, Willa.” He bit his lip. “You look like one of those kids from Africa.”

“Fine.” Ville rolled his eyes. “If it will brighten your day, I will eat a waffle, Bam.”

The skater nodded, and the look of relief on his face did not go by unnoticed. Over the last two weeks, he had forced breakfast down the older man’s throat, and he had pushed him into the shower and washed his dirty clothes. It did not matter how many times they had the same argument, because Ville immediately forgot about the harsh words and fell back into habits of old. The consumption of alcohol began as soon as he got out of bed.

“I’ll wash up a bit before breakfast,” the singer said and let go of the blue-eyed man. Bam nodded, and while his expression remained the same, a faint flicker of guilt burned in his eyes and settled in his stomach like a rock. Ville, who had not taken notice of the change in his eyes, made his way to the bathroom while whistling. He heard Bam as he nearly bounced down the stairs, and then the muffled exchange of words between him and April.
Ville shut the door to the bathroom, turned the key in the lock, and then drew in a shaky breath. His heart fluttered like the wings of a hummingbird. It was as though someone had injected adrenaline into his bloodstream, and as he stood there, he gripped the sides of the sink and felt himself swaying dangerously from one side to the other. The nausea and headache consumed his every thought. It had to stop.

He whispered Finnish swearwords under his breath and wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. His hands shook involuntarily, and he knew that he could not go downstairs until he was better. There was only one cure for the trembling, fluttering nervousness, and as he fumbled for the spare bottle of vodka behind the sink, he could not keep his hands from shaking. After two dreadfully long minutes of searching, he realized that the bottle was nowhere to be found. He also realized who had taken it.

“Bam!” he hissed, and for a moment, he contemplated whether he should confront the skater or not, but he knew it would backfire. With a sigh, Ville decided that he would have to buy another bottle. He fished out his Nokia from his hip pocket to check the time, and much to his relief, the liquor shop was open.

Without saying a single word to Bam, Ville walked out the door and slammed it shut. The skater knew exactly what had inspired the angry action, and when April asked, he merely shrugged and said, “Hell if I know. Guess he’s on his period.”

The moment Ville opened the door, he regretted the drinks he had gulped down so shamelessly, and he regretted the way he had left things earlier. Bam, who was seated in his ever faithful armchair, watched him with relief so palpable that he ached in sympathy; however, the relief was swiftly replaced by exasperation. The Finn felt himself shrink under the weight of his stare, and he stumbled toward his lover. Bam, who knew exactly where the Finn had been hiding for the last couple of hours, glared at him.

“Willa,” Bam said coldly, barely able to contain his anger. “What the hell is going on?”

“I’m sorry, Bam,” the green-eyed man whispered. “You… you hid my bottle. Wasn’t there.” He started nibbling on his lower lip, and then he said, “Had to get another bottle. And then I ran into some… I ran into some people.”

Bam furrowed his brows. “What are you talking about?” he asked and got up from the armchair. Ville, who was a head taller, looked down at Bam and put his hands on his shoulders.

“The vodka!” he exclaimed. “You – you moved it from behind the sink, didn’t you? I-I…” He paused and burped into the shorter man’s face. “I had to get m-more, ‘cause you took the vodka. D’you understand, Bam-Bam?”

The skater paled, though he stated, “I haven’t touched your fucking vodka, Willa.”

Ville shook his head. He laughed. “Now, that’s a lie,” he muttered. “You’re the one com… complaining about it.” He once again gripped around Bam’s shoulder. His balance was failing him. “About the alcohol.”

“Yeah!” Bam yelled and shrugged the hand away, causing Ville to stagger unsteadily for a moment. “Look at yourself, Willa,” he whispered through clenched teeth. His voice quavered, nearly breaking into bits and pieces, and he felt tears burning in his eyes. “Look at what you’re doing to yourself!
You’re all skin and bones.” He paused for a moment, waiting for a reaction, and then he said, “You look like a corpse.”

“Oh!” Ville cried out. The comment seemed to have hit a nerve, and he immediately sobered up a little. “Is that it, Bam? I’m not pretty enough for you?”

Bam grimaced, his red-rimmed eyes narrowing in anger, and he said, “What the hell?”

“That’s what I am to you! That’s what I’ve been all this time,” the Finn spat, pushing his hand against Bam’s chest. Bitterness and resentment glowed in his eyes, and he hissed, “I’m just the pretty boy!”

“That’s the biggest load of crap I’ve ever heard,” the curly-haired man said, rolling his eyes. “It’s fucking retarded!”

Ville smiled humorlessly. “Is it?” He wrinkled his forehead, and his eyes, dark and smoldering, sought Bam’s glare. “Is it!” he repeated, and he said the words with as much spite and disgust as he could conjure. The skater pressed his lips together and turned around, using his body as a wall between them. He had made up his mind to leave as the conversation was turning into a mindless argument, but Ville clasped his arm tightly and pulled him back. Drunk or not, he was strong, and his fingers dug into the younger man’s flesh, leaving bruises on his skin.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

The American said. “What do you think you’re doing?”

The Finn’s free hand gripped Bam’s chin, forcing them to lock eyes.

“I remember…” Ville began, voice dripping with bone-chilling mirth. “I remember when you said that you saw that photo of me in the airline magazine – how you ripped out the page and kept it.” His mouth twisted into a condescending sneer. “You fell in love with me right then and there, didn’t you, Bammie? And you’d do anything get your little hands on me.”

The skater cried out, appalled by the accusation, and he said, “You’ve got no right, Walo. No right.”

“And you kept that damn photo,” the Finn said with a smile on his face. “You worshipped me, didn’t you?”

Bam, who looked as though he had been slapped by an invisible hand, gritted his teeth.

“… Shut up!” he shouted, seething with rage and shame. “Just shut the fuck up!”

“You know who does that?” Ville asked, still smiling that same mocking smile. “Little teenage girls. You know, those fourteen-year-olds who keep posters of me on their walls.” Again, he grinned and put a hand on the younger man’s cheek. “And then there’s you, my little fanboy.”

Bam’s hands tightened into fists. “Shut up, Willa,” he grumbled warningly, taking a step backwards. “You really don’t want to push me any further right now, okay?”

Ville took a step closer. Bam could smell alcohol emanating from his mouth. “Oh, no,” the green-eyed man whispered. “Can’t handle the truth, can we, Bammie?”

“Willa!” He wrapped his fingers around the singer’s frail wrist and squeezed with all his might. Had it not been for the vodka he had poured down his throat, he would have winced. Instead, Ville chortled menacingly. Bam wanted to hit him with every fiber of his being, and had Ville been a friend and not his boyfriend, he would have beaten the bejesus out of him and his arrogance.
“I remember how we first met, Bammie.” His voice brimmed over with contempt, and the younger man bit down on his lip, bracing himself for the argument ahead. “You were so in love with me.” The green-eyed man laughed and dried a fake tear from the crook of his eye, emphasizing the statement. “You were hiding out in the closet – you still are – and you wanted me so-so badly, but you just couldn’t admit it, could you?”

“Okay,” Bam muttered sourly and pushed the taller man away, releasing his hand in the process. “That’s enough bullshit for today!”

Ville let out a derisive snort. “Bullshit,” he repeated, digging his index finger into Bam’s upper arm. “I am stating facts, am I not? You had a hard-on for me – even when we didn’t bloody know each other!”

“That’s got nothing to do with any of this,” the younger man hissed. “And you know what? You’re just proving the fact that you’re a self-obsessed cunt!”

“… If you don’t want me anymore, just say so,” the Finn said, still smiling brightly. “I won’t stay single for long. You simply refuse to see how lucky you are-”

“Will you shut the fuck up!” the skater yelled. For every foul comment Ville flung at him, he felt a painful ache in his chest, one that grew bigger and uglier by the second. It transformed into hatred, and he breathed heavily and prayed that his temper would not get the better of him. He locked eyes with the singer once more, and when he saw the intensity of Ville’s rage reflected in his green orbs, he felt as though he was gazing into the eyes of a beast. It killed his anger.

“You should be careful, Bammie,” the older man said. The smile had finally perished. “I could just leave.”

“… If that’s what you wanna do, Willa. I’m not gonna stop you.”

Ville let out a strained laugh. “You want me to leave, is that it?” he asked. “I’m not pretty enough for you – you think you can do better?” He shrugged and pouted his lips, and then he threatened the skater by asking, “Should I go back to Finland?”

“… I don’t…” Bam whispered and sank back into the armchair. He regarded the Finn with sorrow and disappointment in his eyes. “… I don’t know who you are.” Averting his gaze, Bam suppressed the urge to scream. He suppressed the urge to send Ville on the first flight back to Finland. “Don’t you see that, Willa? You’re not you. You’d never hurt me like that.” A choked sob tore from his throat. “Willa – I love you. I love you.”

The Finn said nothing. He watched the American whose body quivered; whose hands trembled and eyes filled with hot tears.

“You’re the one…” the Finn whispered brokenly as he watched the consequences of his actions being played out before his eyes. “Bammie,” he said and kneeled before the blue-eyed man. He put his hands on his knees and gazed into the deep, shimmering pools of his eyes. “I-I didn’t mean to hurt you, darling. I’m so sorry,” he said and buried his face in the younger man’s lap. “I’m sorry!”

Bam caught his breath while sniffling up his tears. The silence that followed the apology was overwhelming, and Bam, whose heart had been thoroughly rattled, felt paralyzed. Drawing in a sharp breath, he gave Ville’s shoulder a squeeze.

“… You’ve got to stop this,” he said. “You’ve got to get a grip, for fuck’s sake.”

“I will,” the Finn promised, and Bam wanted to believe him.
That night, Ville started snoring the moment his head hit the pillow. Bam, who had a million thoughts running through his mind, could not sleep. He was anxious, and as he watched the familiar face that looked so undeniably beautiful in the moonlight, he was overcome with fear for the future that awaited them.

Ville looked different now that he was sound asleep. His face was unmarred by the problems that ate away at him during the day, and Bam could not smell the alcohol on his breath; he could not see the red in his eyes. In that moment, realization dawned on him. As it sunk in, Bam felt his face become wet and warm with tears. He looked back on the omens, the premonitions and the suspicions he had suffered from the moment he had met Ville – the tight-lipped fear of losing him – and he knew it was happening.

Bam curled his fingers around Ville’s wrist and felt his pulse. Ville was there, but he was not truly there. The demon drink had seduced him with all its empty promises of repair, and Bam was losing him. In reality, Ville was losing himself and all that came with. The trembling hands, bloodshot eyes and erratic behaviors were red flags, and Bam knew it would only get worse as time went on. He had seen the signs before, seeing as many of his friends had been devoured by alcohol and pills. In the end, they were not themselves; they were zombies – empty vessels. And then, when all else had died, they succumbed to the nothingness. It was a slow and creeping kind of suicide, but suicide nonetheless.

Bam could not rest his eyes after that. He did not dare to sleep.

The harsh smell of liquor and cigarettes clung to his body, though he did not know and most likely did not care either. His breakfast had consisted of a bottle of wine and a few cigarettes. Bam had raised an eyebrow at the less than nutritious meal, but he had said nothing, he had merely shrugged and regarded his lover with sadness. He was already slurring his words and could not have walked a straight line even if his life had depended on it. In short, he looked like a man who had given up on life, and Bam was at his wits’ end.

“Willa,” Bam said and pushed the older man away as he attempted to press a less than subtle kiss against Bam’s lips. “Don’t.”

“Why are you being difficult, Bammie?”

Bam grunted. “You’re drunk, Walo.”

“So?”

“It’s not even lunchtime yet,” the American said and ran a hand through his short and messy curls. He watched the Finn as he struggled to stay awake, bleary-eyed and unshaven, and he felt his heart sink to his stomach. “I… you’ve got to stop doing this to yourself, Willa. I can’t watch you self-destruct anymore, d’you get that?”

Ville straightened his back and attempted to come across as sober. His eyes still darted between Bam and the fridge, and while the American was young, he was not stupid. He was getting more annoyed by the second, and he wanted nothing more than to get rid of every bottle in the house, but he knew that Ville would simply buy more, applauding the fact that alcohol was ridiculously cheap in the US.

“I’m not self… I’m not self-destructive,” the singer argued and wrinkled his forehead. “I will admit,
however, that I am self-medicating.”

Bam knew that Ville, in the aftermath of their disastrous argument the previous week, worked hard to seem temperate in his consumption of alcohol. The eyes gave it all away and made for a rather pathetic show. “By drinking a bottle of wine for breakfast?” Bam asked and gave a resentful laugh. “How’s that working out for you, Willa?”

“Just fine,” the Finn said and shrugged. “Takes the edge off.”

“You’re here to unwind,” Bam muttered sourly and got up from the couch. “Can’t you please just stop drinking for a little while? Then maybe you could learn to, you know, relax and unwind without a drink.”

Ville looked as though Bam had cornered him. “N-no,” he decided after a long moment of consideration. “I don’t much feel like it, Bammie… Why do you have to be so hard on me? You don’t know how it’s been- how it’s been lately… I’ve been the mastermind behind every… behind everything.” Again, he frowned and blinked, looking confused. “The band, I mean.”

The skater stood in front of Ville and touched his shoulder and neck with his right hand. Ville smiled and relished the caress. Bam did not appear to be as pleased. Sadness clouded his features, and he quickly realized that he could not stand by and watch this behavior anymore. For every bottle the singer consumed, he became someone else, someone Bam did not recognize.

“Stop this,” he said quietly. It sounded like a cautious warning. “I can’t fucking deal with another drunkard in my life right now. I’ve already got Novak and Raab on my hands, and while they’re hilarious, you’re just… you’re not yourself.”

Ville snorted. “Not myself, huh?” he repeated and glared at his lover. “I’m Ville fucking Valo.”

“No,” Bam said, raising his voice. “You’re a fucking idiot, that’s who.”

Ville did not respond to the accusation, he merely shrugged and scrambled to his feet.

“Where d’you think you’re going?”

“I need a nap, Bam. You’re being impossible.”

Bam’s jaw tightened as he watched Ville climb up the stairs. He worried that he would fall and hurt himself, but then he thought that maybe the fall would have knocked some sense into him. And then, when Bam was all alone in the living room, he felt the tears. He fought to keep them at bay, because he knew that crying would solve nothing. Even so, the sheer hopelessness of the situation made him want to run away and not look back, because he loved the man in question. He loved him and berated him.

“… Bam?” a familiar voice asked, stealing his attention. As he turned around, he saw Melissa standing in the doorway with her arms crossed over her chest. She looked concerned.

“Are you alright?”

“Missy,” he said and then shook his head, angry with the world and himself. “I don’t even fucking know anymore. He’s been… well, you don’t really know him too well, do you? He’s been a fucking wreck since he came back from Finland…”

Melissa offered him a tender smile. As she sat down on the couch, she asked, “Maybe he’s battling depression?”
“He’s just battling himself,” he said, dismissing the suggestion, and there was a new tone in his voice, a resigned one. “He’s got his head up his ass and thinks everything’s about him.”

“They’re not?” the dark-haired woman asked and then looked down at her hands.

“I…” the skater started and then spilled a nervous laugh. “No,” he said firmly and watched his childhood friend with curiosity sparkling in his eyes. Missy, who had always been the girl next door, smiled stiffly in response. As he watched her, he realized that she had become and attractive and attentive woman, and the little girl who had always been at his heels had vanished. He wondered how he had missed it and, moreover, how he had missed out on the lingering looks and sweet smiles. She had no ring on her finger.

“He should get help,” Missy eventually said, forcing him to let go of his foolish thoughts.

“He should get his head out of his ass,” Bam grumbled sourly, shaking his head, “and stop being so fucking self-obsessed.” When his eyes landed on her face, she immediately dropped her gaze and blushed. “He’s just being…” Bam felt his mouth go dry, and he stopped in mid-sentence and said, “Don’t worry about it, he’ll… he’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sure he will,” Missy agreed. A small smile grazed her lips, enhancing her natural beauty.

“So, uh,” Bam said and scratched his chin, “he’ll probably stay in bed all day, and I haven’t got any plans.” He paused and plastered a smile on his face. “D’you want to go for a swim or something?”

The brunette smiled. “Sounds like a terrific idea.”

The day that followed was nothing short of a train wreck. Ville could not get out of bed before he had finished another bottle of wine, and as a result, he had spoken incoherently about everything and nothing. Bam had become frustrated and yelled at him for being drunk again, which had angered the Finn. In the end, he had left Castle Bam while waving his middle finger in Bam’s face and swearing in Finnish. This had rendered the rest of the guys in HIM speechless, though they did not look as though they very shocked by the argument in itself. This alone served as a testimony regarding Ville’s state of mind over the last few months. He hadn’t just suddenly transformed into a prick, after all.

“What the hell,” Bam whispered and ran a hand through his unruly curls. He had dark circles under his eyes and looked about as exhausted as he felt. “What the fuck is wrong with him? I don’t even know what to do here, man.”

Linde sat down next to him on the couch and let out a harsh breath. “I’m sorry,” he said and gave the skater an apologetic look. “I, well, I wanted to call you about… about how he’s been lately, but I just…” The blond paused for a moment, remorseful about his own involvement in Ville’s alcohol abuse. “I thought he’d get better as soon as we wrapped things up in the studio, you know? And then he made plans to come visit you, and, well…” He shook his head. “I thought he’d get better, and I didn’t want to make a big deal out of nothing.”

“Nothing?” Bam repeated with disbelief written all over his face. “He’s not Willa.”

“No,” the guitarist agreed. A moment of silence followed; they both looked down at their feet.

“How long has he been like this?”
The Finn sat back and exhaled deeply. “Oh, um,” he said and shoved his dreadlocks back away from
his face, “he started getting anxious a few months ago, in the middle of recording ‘Venus Doom’. He
always showed up, of course, but he was drinking constantly.” He averted his eyes for a moment;
guilt clung to his features. “When I’d comment on it, he’d blow up.” He heaved a sigh, once again
finding it hard to speak, and then he said, “I know I should have done something. Anything. It just
never occurred to me at the time.”

Bam wrinkled his forehead. “He’s not… he’s always been levelheaded.”

Linde nodded. “He is. But he has a problem, Bam. He’s sick.”

“Sick?” Bam whispered to himself, wrinkling his forehead. “How is he sick?”

“The alcohol,” the blond replied, “it isn’t a choice. It isn’t a lifestyle.”

Bam reflected on the wise words. He had never been one to consider alcoholism anything but self-
imposed misery, but Linde had a valid point. It was plausible that alcoholism could be a disease, and
if one took Ville’s personality into consideration, it seemed all the more likely. Ville – an absolute
control freak – had spiraled out of control, and what else but a breakdown could have opened the
door to alcoholism? Either way, the alcohol was not only beginning to wear down their relationship,
but also Bam’s will to repair it.

The blue-eyed American buried his face in his hands and groaned. “Where the fuck did he go?” he
asked, voice tense and apprehensive, and the Finn shrugged.

“… I know as much as you, Bam.”

“Why the fuck did I let him wander off like that?” he whispered to himself, and all the voices of self-
reproach started talking at once. A sinking feeling of despair welled up within him as he thought
about what had happened. He had let his anger get the best of him, and what should have served as a
helpful confrontation had escalated into something serious. Both men had shouted at the top of their
voices; bitter insults had fallen from their lips. None of it could be taken back.

“I’m such a jerk!” Bam groaned. “I should’ve known better – should’ve handled it better-”

“No-no, don’t do that,” Linde said calmly and put a hand on Bam’s shoulder, hoping to bring him
some comfort in all his wretchedness. “Of course you got frustrated. I would too. Any sane person
would have,” he rationalized, doing his best to reason with the American, but he was stubborn.

“Well, I’m not just anyone,” Bam muttered, and Linde saw the guilt in his eyes. “I’m his boyfriend –
I should’ve tried harder! I mean, fuck…” He gazed down at his shoes and was greeted by the HIM
logo. His heart ached, and he hissed, “Fuck!”

Linde sighed and asked, “How are you supposed to know how to help him? He probably doesn’t
even know that himself.”

“That’s no fucking excuse,” Bam said, shaking his head. “Who knows what he’ll do to himself?”

“Bam,” Linde sighed. “I don’t think that he will harm himself. He isn’t like that.”

“I mean, if he’s sick and all,” Bam added, and as soon as he had uttered the words, he went pale.
Ville, arguably one of the most beautiful human beings Bam had ever seen, was all alone. The US
was everything Finland was not, and the skater considered what would happen if Ville encountered
the wrong people. Being a drunkard, anything could happen, and no one would care. It was a
sickening thought.
Linde drew his lip between his teeth. “I don’t know,” he said, well aware that the situation was less than ideal; however, he knew that Ville would eventually resurface. Whenever they were in the process of producing an album, his nerves became wrought and tense. He had often disappeared for a week or two, needing time to himself, and they had never questioned it. Ville had always been a solitary being, it was part of his personality, and Linde knew that Bam was the complete opposite. He feared his own company.

“I know you’re worried, Bam,” the blond said and smiled thinly. “A piece of advice – don’t sweat it. He’ll probably turn back up again when he’s had some time to think.” He paused. “Or when he’s out of money.”

“Yeah, I dunno about that,” Bam said and let out a loud, mirthless cackle. “He’ll get himself killed!”

Linde, who was momentarily disconcerted by the sudden outburst, watched the American with wary eyes, and as he rose from the couch, he repeated, “Don’t sweat it.” Bam frowned but said nothing, and the Finn offered him a sympathetic look. “I know Ville better than most people,” he said and tied his dreads in a loose ponytail, which flopped over his left shoulder. “He’ll be gone for a week or two-”

“You don’t know that,” the skater snapped. “Like you said, he might be sick. Sick people can’t look after themselves.” His eyes became watery and his vision blurred. He hurried to wipe the tears away from his cheeks, though Linde had already observed his suffering. “Willa’s been really out of it, okay? If I hadn’t shoved food down his throat and forced him into the shower, he would’ve looked like a fucking zombie.”

The blond nodded. While he still believed that Bam was overreacting, he supposed that it would be better to be safe than sorry, and he said, “Let’s go look for him. He’s probably nearby.”

“Yeah,” Bam whispered in agreement, grateful that the guitarist took him seriously. “Let’s.”
On the Mend

Chapter Notes

I just realized there's a hell a lot of irony to this story in the light of recent events involving Bam. I wrote this thing a while ago now and we all thought Bam was getting better, but nope. Novak and Frantz made an awesome podcast about why Bam is the way he is; I highly recommend it. I found it on Spotify. Don't know where else it's available.

Also, I want the best for Bam. He has a beautiful little son and a caring wife, and he shouldn't throw it away. I hope he can be a bit more like the Bam in this story.

You're getting two chapters today because they basically deal with the same thing and I've been so slow to post chapters lately :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

13:50 p.m.         17.04.2017

William regarded Bam steadily. The brunet leaned forward, his eyes fixed on the computer screen and the movie, “Bam’s Comeback”, which they had been working on for months. While Bam watched the movie, his chin propped on his hand, William frowned and searched his face for clues. Bam’s expression was unnerving – blank as a sheet of paper – and the cameraman felt on edge. Bam was either here or there, up or down, but he was never blank. William worried that he was disappointed with the final outcome, but he could not for the life of him understand why. He had poured his heart and soul into that movie, and yet Bam remained perfectly blank and devoid of emotion.

The movie ended; the screen went black.

“I think that’s it,” William said while chewing on a fingernail. Bam, who had witnessed this bad habit on numerous occasions, did not bat an eye, he merely nodded. A tentative smile touched his lips, though it was like a Scandinavian summer’s breeze – sharp and swift – and it did not linger. When Bam said nothing, William cleared his throat brusquely to gain his attention.

“It’s good,” Bam said hastily. “I really like how you changed the music in the last scene---”

“You look a little unsure,” the younger man interfered. He looked as though he wanted to sink through a hole in the ground, embarrassed to have misinterpreted Bam’s vision. “It’s that clip where you fell flat on your face, isn’t it?”

A moment of silence followed as Bam sat open-mouthed and regarded the blond with amusement sparkling in his eyes. He then burst into hysterical laughter and waved his hand in the air, apologizing for his less than professional response. William looked somewhat appalled that his boss would laugh at him when he had asked him a serious question, but then he cracked up too. They both laughed until their faces flushed red and tears flowed from their eyes.

“You’re seriously asking me,” Bam said and dried away a tear from the crook of his eye, “whether or not I’m cool with a clip of me making an ass of myself?”
“Well, famous people can be a nightmare to work with.”

“Still,” Bam said and shook his head. “I’m Bam Margera. I’m famous for being a jackass, not a nun.”

The twenty-three-year-old shrugged. “Alright, fine. But you still looked a little disturbed while watching those last two scenes.” He raised his eyebrow in an inquiring manner. “What’s up?”

The comment put an abrupt end to Bam’s laughter. William immediately sensed his reluctance to speak, but he waited patiently for an answer nonetheless. Bam, who looked torn between talking and remaining silent, let out a sigh. The movie was everything he had wanted and more; however, he was not pleased with himself. He had grown old, and while he had lost the weight and was as fit as could be, he was still old. It had nothing to do with the saggy skin, the wrinkles or the gray strands speckled in among brown strands, but it had everything to do with how he felt. The tattoos, the stiffness and the strange air of self-knowledge, which had never been a trait of his, were all signs of old age. How would his old fans react to seeing him, the dashing daredevil from MTV, in such a state?

“I…” he said and buried his face in his hands. “It’s nothing, Willy.”

“You’re making me feel a little worried,” the blond commented quietly. “I know it isn’t ‘nothing’.”

“It’s got nothing to do with you or the movie,” the older man finally admitted. He ran a hand through his hair and kept staring at the black screen. “I’ve just noticed that – well,” he let out a small laugh and then continued by saying, “when you look at me in the movie, what the hell do you see?”

William shrugged. “I see you, Bam.”

“Yeah, but what about me?”

The cameraman scratched his chin and said, “You’re honest.” When Bam did not respond, William grunted and got up from the chair and brushed imaginary dust from his jeans. “You’re giving them some real answers, Bam. I know they’ve been dying to hear about the car…” His voice trailed off, and he realized that the painful subject had been broached. The car crash had been a definite no-no in their conversations. William understood why. He wanted to slap himself across the face for the insensitive articulation. Bam, on the other hand, seemed untouched by the slip.

“I just don’t want anyone to think that I’m cashing out on it,” he said quietly, eyes drawn to the black screen rather than the cameraman’s eyes. “I know I’ve made my fair share of mistakes, especially after Ryan – after the car crash.” Upon saying ‘car crash’, the same old bitterness crept into his voice. William knew Bam held himself somewhat accountable for the death, even if it was pointless. “I just want to make things right, and when I see myself talking about it…”

William wrinkled his forehead and asked, “Then what?”

Bam smiled transparently. “I seem so pathetic.”

“That’s silly,” the blond said and snorted. “You’re giving them answers, Bam. Wasn’t that your intention with this project in the first place?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled and ran his hands down his thighs. His jeans had been washed yesterday and felt oddly stiff and itchy. He guessed he had used too much soap again. The smell – or stench – of flowers hung in the air. “I just think I’ve realized that I’m getting too old for this bullshit,” he admitted and wondered if he should wash his jeans again, or maybe he should just roll around in the dirt for a bit instead. “That’s it though – I look like a fucking dinosaur trying to be cool.”
The blond burst into laughter. “Bam, t-that’s so wrong,” he managed to say in between laughs. “You’re no dinosaur — you invented the scene — and that’s that, really. You don’t need to prove yourself to a bunch of snotty kids.” He had stopped laughing by then, but the smile on his face would not budge. “You know what kids today enjoy? I’ll show you — YouTube is a proper pimple-popping nightmare!”

“I know all about YouTube,” Bam said with a grunt. “Exactly how old d’you think I am, kiddo?”

“Why, about as old as a dinosaur,” the younger man replied dryly while smirking. “So, I’d say you’re sixty-five million years old. That about right, sir?”

“Ha-ha.” The brunet rolled his eyes at the comment, though a smile still tugged at his lips. “You’re just fucking hilarious, aren’t you?”

“So they say,” William hummed contentedly. When Bam started fidgeting with his wristwatch, he asked, “Still worried about what people might think?”

The question brought on a myriad of conflicting emotions. His eyes became distant as he let out a quiet, “No,” and then stood up, stretching his limbs that had become stiff and sore from exercise. He wondered how many good years he had left. Most athletes had to throw in the towel in their early thirties, and Bam, whose body had taken innumerable beatings over the years, was soon forty.

“No?” William echoed. “Earth to Bam—”

“I’m not worried,” he said in a firm tone of voice. Then, as he realized that his moodiness would not solve anything, he mumbled, “But I am kinda nervous, I’ll say that.”

A line appeared between the blond man’s brows. “Why nervous?”

Bam leaned forward and let out a harsh breath. “I’ve made an ass of myself on TV so many times these last few years,” he explained. For a millisecond, a thin smile grazed his lips, and he said, “I mean, I’ve made an ass of myself, but not in the good way, and I don’t know — I just don’t want this to be another failure.”

“Come on, Bam,” the younger man said smiled encouragingly, “that’s silly. You’re not that guy anymore.”

The skater shrugged. He wondered what had become of the old self-assured Bam — the one who had never shied away from a challenge. “Yes, I’m sober now,” he said quietly, “but my reputation isn’t great. People are gonna think that I’m starring in this movie to make money — to profit from Ryan’s death.” He grimaced upon saying the latter part. “I’m not doing that — really, I’d rather go shoot myself.”

William shook his head. He wondered where Bam had gotten such wild notions from.

“Like I said, you’ve got nothing to prove, alright? And, well, I’ve watched this movie a couple of times by now,” he said and smiled lopsidedly, “and I feel like you’re being very open — very sincere. You’ve always been that way, Bam. Everyone knows you lost it after Ryan passed away, and I know there’s more to the story, but you don’t have to explain the most intimate details of your life to your audience. They don’t need to hear about it, and you certainly don’t owe it to them.”

“Yeah, I agree,” the older man whispered, eyes now glued to the window and the strangely cloudless blue of the sky. He suddenly felt painfully aware of the fact that William knew about his past relationship with Ville. Bam had, in a moment of despair, shed some light on the matter, but he had no wish to further elaborate on the story. He decided to change the subject, tired of talking about
“Besides,” he said instead, his eyes once again glittering with mirth, “we’ve watched this damn movie a thousand times now, so I think it’s safe to say that it’s as close to perfection as it gets.”

William laughed. “Yeah, I guess that’s true. We’ll probably have to watch it a few more times with the people from Element too, once we’re back home again,” he commented and then scratched the back of his neck. He hoped his employers would be satisfied, but then again, the movie was Bam’s project. Bam was their flagship – his skateboards’ were still a hit with kids – and they could not afford to lose him again. William felt relatively safe, though he knew that if anyone were to get thrown under the bus, it was him.

“You’re looking forward to seeing Kim again?” the skater asked, having noticed how William’s eyes had become pensive.

“Always.” A dreamy sort of smile touched the cameraman’s lips. Bam, who was reminded of what it was like to be twenty-three years old and in love, had to stifle a laugh. “She’s picking me up at the airport – said I shouldn’t waste money on a bus ticket.” He paused, his face flushed. Bam guessed it was not just because of the ten dollar bus ticket. “What about you? I’m guessing Nikki won’t be there.”

“Ha-ha. Yeah, she’d be thrilled to see me again,” the skater said, voice laced with heavy sarcasm. William gave him a knowing look, well informed about the soon-to-be-ex-wife. “Nah, Ape’s picking me up.”

“Always the doting mother,” the younger man said with a wry smile. Then he gazed down at his wristwatch and frowned. “Shit. We’ve got like thirty minutes to pack before the cab gets here,” he said and rose from the armchair with a wild look on his face.

“I finished packing this morning,” Bam told him and glanced around the room. As with many young men – and as with Bam himself, mature or not – clothes and several other personal items lay scattered about on the floor. “Good luck with that,” he said with a half-laugh. “I’ll go watch some TV in the meantime.”

“I’ll be quick,” the twenty-three-year-old promised hastily, but the confused expression on his face indicated something else. Bam, who had been notoriously absent-minded in his youth, could only grin in return.

As soon as the thirty-seven-year-old had retreated to his suite, he pulled out his iPhone and uploaded another picture to his Instagram account. He hinted at a movie. Comments immediately started coming in, which caused the thirty-seven-year-old to grin widely, and in spite of the past tragedies that breathed down his neck, he had not felt as genuinely excited about the future in years. Even so, he wished more than anything that Ryan could have been there with him; wished he could have had a beer with him. They always did have fun together. The sun always did shine on happy boys.

They were in the air, far away from Spain and its hills and hotels; far away from its secluded safety. William was snoring in the seat next to Bam, unaware of the fact that Bam was still wide awake. He sat with his eyes closed and listened to the faint buzz of the engine, unable to fall asleep and uninterested in the view. The blue and white of the sky and ocean melted together in a dizzying blur. He could not remember all the times he had gazed out and waited for something else to pop up in the
distance – green woodlands or white mountains – only to find that the change of scenery had done nothing to cure his restlessness.

Bam opened his eyes slowly and blinked a couple of times. He looked around the small cabin of the private jet and stretched his legs out, still sore from long skateboarding sessions and morning runs. Again, he wondered how long he would be able to keep it up – wondered how many more bones he would break – and he smiled.

Then, as soon as happiness had brushed against his lips, he felt the familiar foul breath of his ghosts. His thoughts journeyed back in time; back to the quiet streets of Cuenca. When the sun had gone down, the ghosts had danced their macabre dance and grinned at his misery. Had they come to tell him something? Bam was many things, but he was not a superstitious man. The ghosts that spoke to him originated from his own subconsciousness and were the echoes of his past. Real or not, they had made themselves very clear.

Bam still saw it in his mind’s eye; he saw the face of the man he had once known; the face of the man he had once shared his life with. On the poster, Ville’s face appeared ageless, but Bam knew better. He had noticed how the jawline and cheekbones had become more prominent – more angular – and he knew the weight kept falling off. Ville’s habit of puffing through cigarette after cigarette – drinking drink after drink – was eating away at his body. Bam remembered several arguments about his diet, which had consisted of a chocolate bar a day, a pack of cigarettes and wine. He also remembered the ugly, hacking cough that rattled his bones. The grotesque amount of cigarettes had only worsened his asthma, and in that boiling sea of vice, alcohol had only been the icing on the cake.

In hindsight, Bam certainly saw that he should have realized his limitations; Ville’s limitations. While Ville had been older and hardened by life, he had also been vulnerable and prone to depression, which Bam had always dismissed as the melancholic nonsense of artists. Of course, the truth had been hidden in plain sight – Ville had been thin and frail – and the alcohol had destroyed him from within, almost like an undetected tumor that had gnawed away at his sanity. It had been a slow and agonizing kind of death, one he had dodged by mere inches.

Bam grimaced. He had not understood back then, perhaps out of sheer ignorance, or maybe because he had not wanted to be associated with Ville’s alcoholism. It hardly mattered when the truth was ugly from whichever side one chose to look at it. Bam had been cruel.

If there were any Gods out there, they surely had a twisted sense of humor. After Ryan’s car crash – after his death – Bam had walked down the same road of self-destruction. What could have served as a wakeup call quickly became the opposite. Bam had lived his life in a bottle for years. As it were, he remembered little from those days, though he knew that the poison had kept Ryan’s ghost at arm’s length. It had helped him forget.

Bam gazed sideways and took in the sight of the much younger man who slept peacefully next to him. He reminded him so much of himself and of Ryan at that age, eager and full of hope for a future that would undoubtedly be filled to the brim with happy days. Bam wanted to tell him to appreciate every second of it, but he imagined that he had illustrated that perfectly just by talking about his own life. Ryan would have told Bam the very same thing.

The brunet frowned. Ryan - what would he have said about the ‘Farewell Tour’? Would he have urged him to go? Bam shook his head. Regardless of what Ryan would have had to say, Bam wanted to see HIM perform one last time, for old times’ sake. The relationship between him and Ville had ended a decade ago, and while the bitterness was still there, the hatred was not. He could possibly attend the concert without letting the band know, or maybe he should visit them backstage?
Ryan would have undoubtedly rolled his eyes at Bam’s immaturity. He would have said something along the lines of: ‘Why do you have to make everything so complicated?’, and then he would have forced him to man up and confront the band.

As he sat there, lost in thought and memory alike, it struck him how foolish he had been; how selfish he had been.

When Ville had gone to rehab, Bam had considered it a betrayal of sorts. His brother had seen this as a good opportunity to brainwash him. He had told him that people such as Ville were nothing but trouble, because they were opportunistic and perverted individuals who only sought out pleasure and drama. According to Jess, Ville had considered Bam an easy target from the moment he had met him: young, naïve, and full of adoration for his music. And then he had befriended him and gradually moved closer to his truest agenda, which was to corrupt and destroy.

His throat tightened at the memory, and while he did not hate his brother, he felt suspicious of him and his morals. Jess wanted him to be heterosexual – to be normal – and he would stop at nothing to achieve that state of normalcy. It angered Bam more than he dared to admit.

Bam thought about reaching out to the band now that they were nearing the end of their journey and would soon become a thing of the past. Then maybe he could make peace with the past and finally move on from all the pain and misery. He momentarily thought about sending Ville a text, but the thought alone made him feel sick to his stomach. Frowning, he remembered that he still had Linde’s phone number on his old phone, and he could get in touch with him instead.

He considered the possibility of seeing Ville again. His younger self had decided that he would never again see Ville Valo, not unless there was no getting out of it, and he had succeeded with that for ten years. In spite of this, he felt resentful about the fact that he had found out about the Farewell Tour through a random poster on a wall in Spain. It was a betrayal.

Bam sighed and rubbed his thighs. His thoughts were swarming him like aggressive bees, stinging and buzzing, and he could not swat them away. He could not help but to wonder how had it had all come to this – how life, once unspent and brimming over with potential – had become a mere reflection of the past.

A little less than ten years ago, Bam had known that Ville had stopped loving him. He had vanished for weeks without a word, and that had been proof enough. But now that Bam was older and wiser, he felt ridden with guilt. He had put on Ville’s skin and walked around in it. Ville had told him about his suffering – his depression – and Bam had brushed him off. When the addiction became a never-ending roar, Bam had been angry and selfish. He had thought it a sort of punishment. The insight was hurtful, and he hoped that he would one day get the opportunity to apologize for his merciless rejection of Ville. He had stood on his doorstep, hat in hand, and he had begged for Bam’s forgiveness. He had begged to come in from the cold.

In spite of his guilty conscience, Bam somehow managed to close his eyes and fall asleep. Dreams of green eyes and Mona Lisa smiles filled his brain. They were back at the cabin, listening to the wildlife and feeling the warmth of the sun, but the pleasantness did not last. The dream became a nightmare, and Bam later woke up with a jolt. He had dreamt that Ville had died in a car crash. Bam had been behind the wheel.

"He’s fucking where?"
“Rehab,” Linde repeated slowly over the phone. “In Malibu. It’s called Promises.”

“I…” Bam whispered and leaned against the wall for support. He was dazed and shocked and felt as though someone had hit him over the head with a frying pan. “For fuck’s sake,” he cursed once he had gathered his thoughts. And then, as soon as he realized what the piece of information had meant, he let out a bitter laugh and said, “Why the fuck didn’t he tell me?”

“He only just got admitted,” the Finn reasoned. “And, well,” he began to say and then paused briefly, unsure of how to best communicate the message, “he hasn’t been good, Bam. He’s probably been distancing himself from people because of it. I had no idea until the rehab center called us this morning.”

The words deflated his anger, though not entirely. Ville had stormed off a couple of weeks earlier while drunk and furious. Needless to say, everyone at Castle Bam had been worried sick. They had searched high and low, but Ville had seemingly evaporated into thin air. The guys in the band had tried to tell him that he had been overreacting – that Ville sometimes liked to disappear – but Bam was stubborn. He had looked all over town, convinced that he would find him dead in a ditch somewhere, raped and more dead than alive.

“I should… I should probably visit,” Bam mumbled, willing the anger out of his voice.

“Uh, Bam,” Linde said with a sigh. “He said he doesn’t want anyone to visit him yet.”

“… Alright, then,” Bam grumbled. “If that’s how it’s gonna be.”

“Bam, don’t take it personally-”

“Listen, Linde,” the American said, cutting him short, “thanks for calling, I really appreciate it. At least I know he’s not dead in a ditch.”

“No problem, Bam,” the musician answered in a quiet voice that bled with sympathy. Ville had given them all a scare by disappearing for such a long amount of time, and the fact that Bam had been right – that Ville had struggled – was not lost on him. They had all overlooked it. “Take care – oh, and just call me whenever, if you’d like.”

“Yeah, same to you, man,” he said in return and then hung up.

Silence filled the room. Bam, who was shaking with rage, emitted a sound of annoyance and then punched the wall with his fist, which resulted in bloody knuckles and blood on the wall. He did not care. Ville’s actions had rendered him both bitter and angry to a point where he found himself incapable of keeping his head. The fact that he refused to see anyone struck him as extremely selfish. After weeks of nothing, Bam desperately needed to see him and make sure that he was in fact okay. But as things were, Ville had not even been bothered to make that phone call on his own. Had he stopped caring altogether?

“Fuck him,” he muttered sourly and grabbed his skateboard. He needed to do something productive. Sitting around the house being angry with someone who did not want to speak with him was very unproductive. He would rather forget.

18:41 p.m.

Bam’s chest heaved, he was panting, and his hair had become stringy and was sticking to his sweaty neck and face. The skateboard laid next to him on the asphalt. He had given his everything, and his
limbs were drained of all energy. His muscles had not been sore in a long, long time, but he expected that they would ache in the morning. It would serve as a reminder of his whole-hearted effort, which was always a good feeling. It was progress.

“Bam?”

The skater turned around and saw that Ryan was approaching him with a concerned look on his face. Ryan had been out of town for a few weeks, and Bam had chosen not to talk to him about the quarrel – or Ville’s sudden disappearance from planet earth. But judging from the look on his face, Bam knew he had heard the news from someone else. His heart sank to the pit of his stomach. He did not feel like poking at those wounds, fresh and bleeding as they were. His fists told a tale of their own.

“Hey, Dunn! What’s up?” he said and willed a cheerful smile to his lips. For a split second, he was hopeful that Ryan wanted to talk about something unrelated to the Finn, but luck was not on his side that day.

“I talked to Ape,” he began and then hunkered down next to his best friend on the ground. Peering into the red, sweaty face of his childhood friend, he asked, “What the fuck happened?”

Bam shrugged. “He’s… well,” he mumbled absently and stared down at his hands. He wanted to punch someone – not Ville – but he wanted to punch someone. The rage, white as the glaring sun above them, bubbled inside his chest like fizzy water. “Linde says he’s in rehab down in Malibu. He just got admitted.”

The bearded man furrowed his brows, struggling to comprehend it all. “Rehab?”

“Yeah, I know,” Bam said and gave a mirthless laugh that hurt him to his very core. “He hasn’t even called me, or texted me.” He bit his lip to keep it from quivering. “I… I don’t know shit.”

Ryan put a supportive hand on Bam’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Jesus,” he muttered quietly and then shook his head in disbelief. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he said again and put his arm around Bam, holding him a little closer. “How are you doing?”

The question made everything fall apart. Tears sprang to the brown-haired man’s eyes, and he bit his lip to keep himself from sobbing out loud, but nothing could be done to keep the storm from coming, not when sudden bursts of pain seared through his entire body. A half-stifled yell tore from his chest – a gut-wrenching sound – and he covered his face with his hands, embarrassed and even ashamed of the emotional outburst. Ryan, who had grown up with Bam, had only seen him cry a handful of times throughout the years, and only ever because of physical pain. He was angry with the Finn; he was utterly disappointed in him. But even as he shook with rage, he refrained from saying all the foul words that came to mind. Bam had undoubtedly thought those exact same thoughts and would not benefit from hearing them from Ryan.

“I dunno… I’m just… just…” Bam squeezed out between sobs. “How can h-he…how?”

Ryan drew him in for a proper hug and held him in his arms while he cried. As he held him, he felt his body tremble from the impact of the last few months. His tee-shirt was getting wet from where Bam’s face was pressed against his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Bam,” he said after some time and stroked down his back. There was nothing else for him to do, though he intended to give Ville a piece of his mind. “Really fucking sorry.”

“… He hates me now,” the skater whispered and pulled back from the embrace. His eyelids were thick and swollen. Tears and snot dripped down his chin. “He… why else would he just fucking
“Leave like that?” he asked helplessly and wiped the snot away with the back of his hand. “And then just… just disappear, a-and…”

“If Linde’s right and he’s really sick, he doesn’t think like that,” Ryan said in a voice that was soft and measured. “I don’t know, Bam. Maybe you should give him the benefit of the doubt?”

“I-he doesn’t even… doesn’t even want to talk to me,” Bam continued. Fresh tears burned his eyes and he blinked furiously, trying to clear his vision. “And I fucking hate his guts for it, for just leaving like that. I thought he was…” his voice trailed off into thoughtful silence. He swallowed thickly and whispered, “I thought he was dead – I honest to God thought he was dead and left to rot somewhere. I w-went… I went looking for him, Dunn – I went looking.”

“You did?”

“I did. E-every goddam dump and ditch in the county… I-I…”

The younger man continued to bawl his eyes out, and as they sat there next to one another, Ryan could not help but to think that it was not supposed to end like this. Because even if Ville was in fact ill and deluded by the spirits like so many before him, Ryan knew that Bam had sacrificed much to be with him. Their love had been strong, and yet something had entered the Finn’s head and poisoned him; it had stripped him of all that had been precious in his life; every valued possession. It had stripped him of Bam’s devotion, which had been endless up until that point. And in the end, Ville only had himself to blame.

“I knew… I knew I’d lose him at some point,” Bam admitted when Ryan failed to further contribute to the conversation. “I-I knew he’d grow sick and tired of me… ‘cause I’m just a moron, Dunn. I’m just some loser.” He licked his dry lips and leaned his head against Ryan’s shoulder, too tired to care about his pride. It had already been dragged through the mud. “A-and this whole ‘alcoholism’ thing, well, it’s just an excuse… just a fucking excuse to get out.”

Ryan sighed and asked, “Why would he lie though?”

“He’s not… he’s not lying. B-but the fact that he doesn’t want to fucking talk to me, or see me, or even text me…” Bam paused, once again pulling away from Ryan. “I mean, what else would you call that? He’s avoiding me. He thinks it’s okay to let me think he’s fucking dead! I’d never fucking do that to him!”

“Look, Bam…” the ginger said in a compassionate voice, “maybe he didn’t want you to see how bad things were? Maybe he’s just embarrassed about this whole mess?”

Bam shook his head. Apart from his nose, he was pale; his cheeks were shining with wetness.

“He wanted out,” he whispered brokenly and rubbed his nose. “And I… I just can’t deal with it anymore. I-I can’t go through this again, you know? ‘Cause yeah, I love him… I love him, Dunn. But… I hate him too, ‘cause he fucking left me.”

Ryan nodded weakly. He knew that Bam was right. Ville, who was both older and wiser, had made some bad decisions where his relationship with Bam was concerned. While Ryan knew that everyone was bound to walk down the wrong path every now and then, he could not forgive Ville for the dark shadow he had cast over Bam’s life. He had initially thought that the relationship would force Bam to see himself in a different light – a truer light – but the opposite had happened. Ville had forced his melancholy upon him; his distorted worldview. Ryan could only hope that Bam saw the ugly truth for what it was.
“Not everyone deserves a second chance,” he said and took a hold of Bam’s wounded hand, “not when they’ve hurt you intentionally. They’ll just fuck you over for a second time – and a third time.”

Bam’s mouth twisted into a pained smile. “He knows what he’s doing, otherwise he wouldn’t be doing it.”

Ryan said nothing. What more could he have said? As he sat there on the asphalt and watched Bam out of the corner of his eye, he knew that Bam’s heart had been shattered. No woman had ever gotten that close to him before, not in a way where it would have hurt him to end things. But Ville was unique. He had become an obsession when Bam had been just twenty years old and about as naïve as a preschooler. Perhaps that pureness had lingered until now. Ville had gunned it down like it had meant nothing.

“Let’s order some pizza,” Ryan eventually said. “It’s on me.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments are appreciated <3
When You Pick a Flower

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry. I'm always late.

Anyways, I hope you can forgive me :) and I hope you enjoy the chapter. It's a long one.

Comments are appreciated <3

14:34 p.m.         17.06.2017

Bam stared down at the screen of his iPhone for the millionth time that day and groaned. He was trying to write a text message to Linde, but he kept writing and rewriting it, unable to find the right words. Ten years had passed since they had last talked to one another. Those years had become a wall between them, and how on earth could he overcome that obstacle? He had not the faintest idea, and while he supposed that he could write and rewrite the message until he was blue in the face, he found that he was running low on patience.

“… Would you consider… no-no-no! Would you want to meet up in…” Bam sank his teeth into his lower lip until he could taste blood. “Fucking hell,” he grunted and dried away the red, metallic liquid with the back of his hand. At this, his cheeks turned pink with exasperation. How could it be so difficult? He had already composed the brief message in his mind, but it somehow would not translate into writing.

“Okay, that’s it,” Bam muttered to himself, and as he skimmed through the text one final time, he felt that the words had stopped making sense altogether. He wrinkled his forehead and stashed his phone away in a drawer, too annoyed to even look at it.

As soon as the iPhone was out of sight, the skater let out another groan and buried his face in his hands, frustrated with himself and with the world. He wondered when Lady Fortuna would once again be on his side, or perhaps she had grown tired of him and his antics? It hardly mattered at that point; Bam was tired of himself.

He rose from the swivel chair and started to pace around the room with his hands clasped behind his back. His impatience had converted into a fidgety restlessness; a restlessness he could not control. A couple of days ago, the words had seemed so vivid to his inner ear, but once he had tried to express them in writing, he found that it was impossible. He could not simply write to someone he had not seen in a decade and pretend that all was well; however, it felt equally unnatural to bring up the past. Was there a middle ground – a gray area in between?

Bam sighed and let out a string of profanities. Then, as soon as he had blown off some steam, he walked over to the window, curious about the weather, and saw April kneeling down next to the flower bed in the driveway. She was planting white roses. Bam, who had never taken an interest in gardening, which in turn explained the disheveled state of the garden, watched her with a deep frown etched into his face. He asked himself when the world had come to this – to his mother sneaking over to plant roses in his driveway. It was absurd.
“Jeez,” he said to himself and opened the window. He popped his head out and shouted, “Ape! What are you doing?”

The sixty-one-year-old woman jumped, surprised, and then turned around and saw her son. She quickly rose to her feet and brushed the dirt off her beige pants, yelling, “I didn’t know you were home!” and waved at him. It made him roll his eyes, irked that she was making herself comfortable.

“What difference does that make?”

“What?” she asked and waved at him. “I can’t hear you!”

The skater blew out of his cheeks and yelled, “I’m coming down, Ape!”

After preparing a quick lunch in the kitchen, Bam walked outside with two bottles of soda and a sandwich for April. He handed her the bottle and watched as she drank it thirstily, finishing it in less than a minute. After hours out in the sun, she was both dehydrated and tired. Bam knew she wanted to be helpful and keep herself busy, bored whenever her granddaughter attended school, but he did not want her to exhaust herself for his sake.

“So,” Bam began to say, arms folded over his chest, “what’s up with the flowers, Ape?”

“Oh, I thought they’d smarten up the façade,” she said and smiled one of those affectionate smiles of hers. Bam had wanted to criticize her for not having consulted with him before purchasing the white roses, but seeing the hopeful happiness on her face, he reconsidered it. If planting flowers in his garden would brighten her day, then who was he to take that away from her?

“It looks good, Ape,” he admitted. “Never thought about getting white ones.”

“They look darling, don’t they?” she asked and appeared to be smitten with the flowers. “Pure, in a way.”

“Yeah,” Bam whispered and felt his throat tighten at the word. Pure. It reminded him of fresh snow and the icy north wind of Scandinavia, the one that had made him shiver to the bone. Ville had held him tighter then, and he had made hot chocolate and fed him sticky, warm marshmallows from the cheery fire burning in the hearth.

“You alright, dear?” the blonde asked. “You look a little shaken up.”

“Uh, yeah,” Bam said and scratched the back of his head. The vacuum of his memory had pulled him back into the pitch-black ocean of his subconsciousness. “I just… the flowers,” he muttered, “they remind me of… well, of Finland.”

Ape was about to say something when a high-pitched voice called out, “Grandma!”

“Hey, Sam!” April yelled back. “We’re over here.”

“Coming!”

Bam’s eyes immediately lit up at the sight of his niece; she skipped down the driveway with her skateboard under one arm and her favorite action figure in the other. She was a beautiful child, fair-haired and with warm, brown eyes, and just like Bam and Jess had predicted ages ago, she was a bit of a tomboy. Kelly kept braiding her hair every morning, but the moment she walked out the door, she let her hair loose. She never wore anything but oversized tee-shirts and black jeans, and she absolutely loved exploring the woods outside Castle Bam. Kelly did not approve.
The nine-year-old girl tossed the skateboard and the action figure aside and threw herself at Bam, hugging him tightly.

“I’m-gonna-squeeze-you-to-death!” she yelled in an explosion of words and squeezed him with all her might.

“Nope!” Bam said and lifted her off the ground with ease. The girl squeaked with delight as he spun her around and, as he put her down on the ground, she pouted, dismayed that the fun had come to such an abrupt end.

“Do it again,” she demanded. Bam smirked.

“Not right now,” he said and nodded at his mother. “And don’t forget about grandma – she needs some love too, you know.”

Sam looked at April and scrunched up her nose. “She’s all dirty.”

“Like you care,” Bam said and grinned contentedly as he ruffled her already tangled hair. “You’re always running around in the woods anyways. Kelly yells at me all the time because your clothes are all muddy after we’ve been hanging out.”

The child beamed innocently and yelled, “Alright, alright!” before running over to April. The blonde pulled her into her arms and gave her a bear hug, and the child, who normally hated being babied, relaxed into the hug. As Bam watched, he tried to smile, but a slight tinge of sadness bordered his eyes. After the divorce had become final, issues of old had flared up like a wound gone septic. Jess and Kelly had become small-minded and petty again, much like the old days, and Bam knew all too well why. Sam was the only reason he did not move away, but of course, he would never abandon her.

“I’ll go and make us some dinner, how about that?” April suggested once she had let go of her granddaughter.

“I want spaghetti and meatballs,” Sam demanded happily and then turned around to look at Bam. “Right, uncle?”

“Sounds good.”

“You’ll look after her in the meantime, Bam?”

Sam rolled her eyes at her grandmother and said, “I’ll look after him.”

April laughed. “Of course – silly me. Look after your uncle, Sam. I’ll call when dinner’s ready.”

The blonde waved at them until she disappeared out of sight. Bam, who felt slightly absent-minded, watched the white roses she had left behind and let out a dissatisfied sigh. Finland, he thought, and then he remembered where he had put his iPhone. Why was it so hard to write down a few casual lines? It really bugged him.

“Uncle Bam?” Sam asked and elbowed him carefully in the ribs. “Let’s go explore the woods. I think I left my pocketknife somewhere.” She frowned with concentration. “By the pond, I think.”

Bam cocked his head slightly at her, the corner of his lips curving upward. “Oh, you ‘left’ it in the woods?”

The girl rolled her eyes dramatically and said, “Fine, I lost my pocketknife. Happy?”
Bam laughed. “Very.”

They walked down the dirt path until they reached a clearing. There, under the shade of a tall tree, was a muddy pond and several discarded stage props – relics of Bam’s MTV days. His niece had claimed them and had built a makeshift shed and a raft, which Bam hoped would remain on land and away from the pond, but knowing who she was related to, he doubted it. He had also made up his mind about not discouraging her from making her own stupid mistakes, wanting her to explore the endless possibilities of childhood. Needless to say, Kelly knew nothing about the pocketknife, the stage props or the pond. She had always wanted a girly girl and disapproved of Sam’s boyish attitude, constantly scolding her for getting dirty or for scraping her knees.

“Found it,” Sam said, kneeling down by the raft and pulling it out from under a log. She snapped it open and studied the glistening blade.

“What’s up with the raft?” he asked, unable to constrain his curiosity.

Sam shrugged. “I was bored. Do you like it, uncle?”

“Yeah, it’s cool.”

“Was thinking of trying it out later,” she mused but then shook her head. “Mom wouldn’t like it, would she?”

“Mom doesn’t need to know.”

Sam smiled. “She’d know anyways,” she pointed out and put the knife down again. “I’d get wet, you know, and she always gets mad about those things.”

“I’ll get you some clean clothes. You’ll just change at my place before going back home again.”

She nodded eagerly at the suggestion. “Oh, that’d be awesome. Fucking awesome.”

Bam raised a brow at the swearing, but he said nothing. She had made a habit out of swearing in front of him, probably because Bam could be downright crude, even in her presence. As long as she did not mimic his less than gracious behavior in front of Kelly, he did not mind. He would not risk her wrath, even after years of living in the same neighborhood.

“Uncle?”

“Yeah?”

“Why aren’t you and auntie Nikki together anymore?”

Bam sat down on the raft and said, “Grown-ups don’t always stay together for life, Sam. I guess we grew apart, like you and that Mandy girl at school. Wasn’t that her name?”

The nine-year-old rolled her eyes. “Uncle Bam,” she said and sat down next to him on the raft. The logs groaned under their combined weight. “Half the kids in my class come from broken homes. I know all about those things, of course, but I was wondering why you and Nikki aren’t getting along anymore!”

“We just weren’t meant to be, Sam. You shouldn’t worry about it.”

She looked thoughtful for a moment. “I overheard Mom and Dad talking about it the other day,” she admitted quietly, sounding somewhat ashamed. “They, um, they said something about someone
called Will – who’s that? And, well, Dad said he’s to blame for everything – for you getting a divorce every other year.”

Bam snorted. “I’ve been divorced twice.”

“Who’s Will?”

“Someone I used to know.” Bam muttered. “Look, none of it matters at this point, okay? Jess – your dad, I mean, thinks he knows what’s best for me.”

Sam nodded. “I know the feeling,” she said and tossed a rock in the pond. “He can be a pain in the ass.”

The skater smiled. “Yeah.”

She drew her lower lip between her teeth and started plucking on a loose thread on the hem of her tee-shirt. “I still love him more than I love Mommy,” she whispered, her voice low and yet determined.

“Well, she can be a bit-”

“Bitchy,” Sam finished for him. The ghost of a smile grazed her lips.

“Strict,” Bam corrected her, though he did not disagree. It would, however, be inappropriate to voice that thought.

“Why don’t you want to talk to me about Will?” she asked innocently. “Who is he?”

Bam stiffened up at the mention of that name. He looked at his niece, and even if he smiled, Sam saw the sad glimmer in his eyes. She gazed down at her muddy shoes, convinced that she had stepped across some invisible boundary.

“He’s… someone from my past,” Bam said after a moment of hesitation. “I used to be with him.”

Sam scrunched up her nose. “You used to be with a boy?”

“Yeah.”

“Daddy says that it’s sinful to-”

“Sam,” the older man whispered hoarsely. “Gender means nothing, okay? Your dad doesn’t agree with me on this – he never did – but I don’t want you to hate someone just because they’re not like you. I think it’s way more ‘sinful’ to judge before you’ve given him or her a chance.” He bit the inside of his cheek and offered her a forgiving smile, aware that Jess was spewing out hateful nonsense. She could not be blamed; however, there was only a matter of time before such horrid values became internalized. His input was important.

“Don’t you agree?” he asked softly.

She nodded. “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad, uncle,” she said and put her small, milky hand on top of Bam’s large, calloused one. “I really don’t care. Just, well, you’ve been married to girls.”

“… And I’ve gotten divorced,” he said quietly. “Anyways, you shouldn’t think about these things, alright?”

She rolled her eyes and said, “No. I can’t just forget about it. You’re the one who told me.”
“I guess.”

“So,” she started to say, kicking at the dirt with her shoe, “whatever happened to him?”

Bam let out an amused laugh, humored by her good-natured curiosity. While she was the daughter of the two most difficult people Bam knew, she was also the granddaughter of the friendliest woman he knew. She had his and Jess’ stubbornness, but like April, she was also capable of reading people. If anyone saw through his bullshit, it was April and Sam, the most important women in his life.

“He’s in Europe,” Bam informed her. “In Finland, where Santa lives.”

Sam snorted. “He isn’t real, uncle Bam. And if he were, he would have lived in the North Pole.”

The brunet smiled. “Well, I’ve been to Santa’s Village,” he said teasingly. “In Finland.”

“What story again,” she groaned, hiding her face in her hands. “Please, have mercy on me.”

Bam threw back his head and laughed, loud and hearty, and then held his hands up in surrender. He sometimes had to remind himself not to become a clone of his father, retelling and embellishing stories of old until the myth outgrew the man, or in his father’s case, until the salmon he had caught twenty years ago became bigger than his flabby stomach. The fact that the mentioned salmon now hung on the wall did nothing to help.

“I, um, I actually haven’t seen Willa since before you were born,” he said after some time, though mostly to himself. Sam, however, grimaced upon hearing this.

“Isn’t that kinda stupid?”

“Why’s it stupid?”

She threw another rock into the pond. It landed with a small splash.

“Cause you still care,” she murmured. “I mean, I wouldn’t want to stop talking to someone I care about.” She furrowed her brows at this, looking very solemn. “Then I’d be sad, too.”

Bam had drawn the curtains and shut the day out. In his bed, safely hidden under the covers and surrounded by pillows, he listened to the silence of the house. He listened to the tick-tock of the grandfather clock in the hallway; listened to the dripping of a tap in the bathroom; listened to the nothingness. Inside his head, however, there was a constant buzz — a jumble of thoughts — and Bam felt as though he were losing it. All sprang from the void Ville had left behind. The searing pain, intense and yet dull, made it impossible to get out of bed. Bam had tried; he had failed.

He knew he was being useless and immature, but he could not help it. What was, after all, the point of facing another pointless day? Bam had no idea. Everyone kept telling him ‘lover’s come, lover’s go’ and ‘cheer up’, as though he could. Had he been able to, he would have carried on like usual, and had it been a regular breakup, he would have been sad for a week and then jumped back into the saddle. But as it were, they were still together. None of them had ended things, though Ville had walked out on him.

Bam had spent a few weeks crying. At first, he had cried because he had imagined wild, morbid scenarios — Ville had been raped and possibly killed — but that had not come into existence. Instead,
he had received a phone call from Finland. Ville had not been bothered to make the call himself. He had also expressed that he did not want to see anyone, blaming it on the strict policy of the rehabilitation center. The skater knew what it meant, of course, and he also knew that the excuses were all just mumbo-jumbo. But even if he knew those things, how could he sit back and simply accept it? In his mind, their relationship was the most significant part of his life; it had been the most significant part of his life. Moving on seemed the equivalent to moving mountains.

He decided not to think about it, about the man who had come and left, and he resorted to busying himself with the clock, counting the seconds and hoping that it would somehow take his mind off Ville. Even momentary distractions were welcome.

The sound of footsteps interrupted him in his thoughts, causing him to crack one eye open. He had locked the door, had he not? Dismayed, he pulled the covers over his face and slowed his breathing, feigning sleep.

When someone knocked and asked, “Bam, are you in there?”, he stayed still. In spite of the lack of a response, the door creaked open. Bam, who wanted to be left alone, let out a snore.

“Bam?” he heard April say. “Bam, are you asleep?”

Again, the skater snored. April sighed.

“You can’t stay in bed all day.” she huffed and pulled back the bed covers. Bam rolled onto his stomach and said, “Go away, Ape.”

“Bam, you’ve been-”

“Go away.” he repeated. “I’ll take back the key if you don’t.”

April did not dignify the childish threat with an answer, she merely shook her head and regarded her son with a sad look on her face. Over the last three days, he had practically isolated himself from the outside world. His cluster of friends had, over a period of about five years, been regular visitors at Castle Bam. Some of them had all but lived there. When the skater had suddenly chased them away from the property, stating that they were all ‘freeloading shitheads’, they had been utterly shocked, though they all remembered how Ville had gone missing after a particularly loud argument. April had later been notified by Ryan; their friends had called him – worried about Bam’s behavior – and when Bam had refused to talk to his best friend, the alarm bells had gone off.

“You can’t stay in bed all day long, dear.” April’s voice shifted to a maternal tone that sounded both strict and concerned, and Bam grunted in response, annoyed with her for caring.

“Oh, I can’t?” he asked, words muffled by the pillow. “Just watch me.”

Unbeknown to Bam, the blonde woman rolled her eyes and walked over to the window. She drew the curtains and let in the sun. Light flooded the room, and April, who had not visited in a few days, gasped. The floor had all but vanished – clothes, tissues and pizza boxes were everywhere – and empty beer cans were lined up by the bed. What disgusted her the most were the Coca-Cola bottles by the night table; they contained a golden liquid that, in the light of the sun, looked like fluid amber.

“Bam, you’re getting out of bed.” she demanded while contemplating what to do with the bottles. “This isn’t making anything better, do you hear me? You’re being incredibly childish right now.” She put her hands on her hips, hell-bent on getting him out of bed. “Selfish, too,” she added.

The brunet let out a deep breath and said, “I think I’m entitled to some peace of mind.”
“… What about my peace of mind?” she wanted to know, her eyes crinkled with frustration. “Honestly, Bam, you are twenty-seven! You can’t go on like this – you can’t. I won’t have it!”

“Then go. Just fucking get out of here.”

“Bam,” April said, her voice strained, “you’re a grown man. Yes, this sucks, but you can’t do this to yourself – to your friends.”

Bam rolled to his side and propped up his head with his hand. His eyes were red-rimmed with bags underneath, either from crying or from a hangover, and from what April could see, both were plausible explanations.

“Which basically just means that you can’t barge in here and boss me around like some kid,” he said in a flat voice. “Besides, I don’t feel great. If you’re staying, make yourself useful and go get me a sandwich or something – and some coffee would be nice.”

April folded her arms over her chest and said, “Your brother’s coming over.”

“What?” Bam wrinkled his forehead. “No. No, he isn’t.”

“He is.”

“I didn’t fucking invite him,” Bam grumbled. “It’s my house.”

“Yes, I’m fully aware of that, Bam,” the middle-aged woman said while leaning down and scooping up dirty clothes, disgusted with the state of the bedroom. At the same time, she was worried that Bam would sink further into depression. She saw the signs everywhere she looked, and as it were, he was unable to take care of himself, of the house and the enormous garden. He had shunned all his friends and family and refused to talk to anyone. April, who had never had any kind of authority over her youngest child, saw the need to bring in someone who did. She realized that Jess’ fall from grace had ruined their brotherly relationship – and rightfully so – but she also knew that Bam needed someone who could help him out of his emotional quagmire. Jess was their only option.

“Then call him and tell him not to come.” Bam wrinkled his forehead. “D’you hear me, Ape?”

“He’ll be here in half an hour,” April said bluntly and walked back toward the door. Before she closed it, she said, “You need to get dressed, Bam. I’ll make us some lunch, alright?”

Bam simply stared at her for a few seconds, contemplating whether or not he should protest, but in the end, he looked as though he had resigned to his fate and muttered, “Fine. Whatever,” under his breath.

April, in spite of Bam’s terrible mood, smiled. “Good. And Bam?”

“What?”

“I know it’s hard to see right now, but everything will be fine. I promise.”

The middle-aged woman waited to see Bam’s reaction, but she only got a blank stare in return. His eyes – always a radiant blue – were suddenly lifeless, pale and almost gray in color. She felt her throat tighten at the sight and left hurriedly, eager for her eldest child to arrive. Bam was not himself; he was mean and cold. Yes, he had always been untidy – and yes, she had always spoiled him rotten – but he had always been kind. He had always worn that beatific smile on his face.

As she wandered down to the laundry room, tears flowed down her cheeks, and she worried that her
happy, carefree son was gone, lost to the clutches of a dangerous depression. April, always the
loving mother, had never resented anyone, but if Ville had caused Bam such bottomless pain, she
resented him for it.

17:18 p.m.

Bam had not moved an inch. He still hid under the covers, though he stared at the ceiling and
wondered when Jess would show up. Before Ville, they had been the best of friends. He
remembered the safety of growing up with an older brother. Jess, who was a talented musician, had
always supported him in his decision to be a professional skateboarder – and then stuntman – and
Bam had promoted Jess’ band through his MTV sketches. They had never envied one another and
had been as amiable as brothers could be, with the occasional fight and snarky comment, but neither
of them had been able to stay mad for long. All of that had changed at the family dinner the year
before. A bitter sense of disappointment still lingered in Bam’s eyes; however, the anger outweighed
the disappointment by far.

The skater’s vision blurred. He swiftly brushed away the tears and squeezed his eyes shut.

Was Ville thinking of him? He hoped that he was – hoped that he was hurting all over. He deserved
it.

Bam groaned, annoyed with himself for thinking about the traitor, and then pulled himself up into a
sitting position. The bed was new; the black clothes had been disposed of. He had wanted to get
away from Ville; away from his smell and the strange ownership someone has over their possessions,
even when they are absent. Of course, the burning of the expensive, antique bed had been idiotic.
Someone would have paid a lot of money for that bed, especially when it had the name ‘Ville Valo’
attached to it. But in a moment of bottomless despair, he had burned it. It had done nothing to
strangle the memories though.

He reached under the bed and pulled out a green piece of clothing. Holding it up under his nose, he
inhaled and waited for more wetness to spill from his eyes. Because his cheeks and eyelids were
swollen and raw, the salty tears felt like boiling water. A sob tore from his chest.

“… Bam?”

The skater froze. Looking up from the green shirt that smelled of cigarettes alongside the clean,
sweet musky smell of Ville’s skin, he felt his body tremble with rage. At the same time, he felt a sting
of shame at having been caught red-handed.

“Jess,” he said coolly, but the slight quiver in his words betrayed him. “Didn’t think you’d show up.”

His brother hesitated. He stood in the doorway and took in the sight of his younger brother, whose
face was ashen and body thin, and he could hardly believe that it was Bam. Over the years, Bam had
always been happy-go-lucky because life had let him, but his situation had undeniably changed.

“Of course,” he said after some time. “I mean, we’ve always been there for one another, haven’t
we?”

Bam snorted. “Yeah, until you said all those things last year.”

“Well, I was right-”

“Yeah, I knew you’d say that,” Bam grumbled and stuffed the shirt under one of the pillows. “I
knew you’d fucking say that. You’re here to gloat, aren’t you?"

“No, I’m not,” Jess said firmly. Then, as an uncomfortable silence fell over them once more, he licked his lips, closed the door and sat down on the swivel chair by the desk. Bam’s face mirrored the aggressive resentfulness that burned in his chest, but he said nothing, he merely watched his brother and waited for an explanation.

Jess ran a hand through his short, straight hair and said, “I don’t want to hurt you, Bam, and I’m sorry about what I said back then.” He twisted his wedding ring on his finger, struggling to find the right words. “And, well, I didn’t want to hurt you back then either, you know? But I saw something… something that worried me.” He went quiet and risked eye contact, but the brunet looked away. “I know that you still want to twist my head off, but…”

“But what?”

The taller, heavier of the two offered an apologetic smile. “I’m not a saint, Bam. I get angry sometimes, and you know, I lose my head.” He paused, looking down at his folded hands; at the gold ring. “I’m sorry, Bam. I shouldn’t have said those things – I should’ve given Ville a chance to prove himself, and I intended to…” Gazing up from his hands, he locked eyes with the skater and said, “But then he left.”

Bam felt as though someone had delivered a harsh blow to his stomach, squeezing the air out of his lungs. His eyes refilled with fresh tears, and he dried them away and whispered, “That’s no fucking excuse,” through clenched teeth.


“Then why are you here?”

“To make amends, Bam.”

“There’s no fucking way I’m gonna let?”

“Bam,” the ginger said, interrupting him mid-sentence, “would it be so terrible to reconcile?”

As the question settled in Bam’s mind, he sighed and raked his fingers through his greasy curls. “No,” he said after a couple of seconds of contemplation. “No,” he repeated breathlessly and looked out the window. Again, he wondered if Ville was thinking of him.

“I’m here to help,” Jess said and sat down on the bed. The smell of sweat, beer and grime filled his nostrils, but regardless of the stench, he put his arms around Bam and pulled him in for an odd hug. Bam let him.

“‘Help’?” Bam repeated.

“Yeah, I’m here to help you,” Jess promised. “And, if I get your blessing, Kelly and I have made plans to buy the house next to Mom and Dad. Old Mr. Johnson’s place. He died last month.”

“What?” the brunet said in disbelief and withdrew from the embrace. Gazing into his brother’s blue eyes, he asked, “But what about the band?”

“I’m taking a break.”

“Oh, no-no-no,” Bam said and shook his head. “Hell no, you’re not doing that just to look after my sorry ass!”
Jess laughed softly at Bam’s answer. “Well, it isn’t entirely about you, Bam.”

“But you’re not even thirty yet,” the younger one argued. “You’re way too young to retire.”

“I’m not retiring,” Jess said and fished something out of his hip pocket. “Here, have a look at this.”

Bam took the picture and studied it intently. It was one of those bun-in-the-oven pictures expecting couples brought back as souvenirs from the hospital. While it looked more like an undeveloped alien than a baby, Bam felt a beam of joy inside his chest. For the first time in weeks, he felt some kind of hopefulness.

“… Is Kelly pregnant?”

Jess smiled proudly. “Yeah, she is.”

Bam continued crying. “Oh, man,” he said and let out a strangled sob. “I just, wow. Was it planned?”

“No.” Jess laughed a little, his eyes dreamy. “It was a very happy surprise.”

“How far along is she?”

“About three months,” the ginger said. “You’re the first one to know, Bam. Haven’t even told Mom yet.”

“Oh.” Bam said and then nodded, speechless with surprise and, for the first time in ages, happiness, and as he looked down at the newest addition to their small family, a corner of his mouth lifted. The baby was a ray of hope in an otherwise gloomy world, and Bam found that the depressive aspects of his life became less pervading; he found that he could forgive his brother. In the scheme of things, clinging to bitterness and resentment would solve nothing, and now that a child had entered the picture, a happy family life seemed all the more important.

“Her name is Samantha,” Jess said in a voice thick with emotion. Gazing into Bam’s tearful eyes, he added, “Or Sam,” in an almost inaudible whisper.

Bam looked as though someone had pulled the rug from under him. He let out a strange noise that quickly transformed into laughter. “After me? No, you’re joking, Jess. Kelly wouldn’t accept that, she thinks I’m an irresponsible brat!”

“Well,” Jess said and smiled slyly, “you can be.”

Bam shrugged. “Yeah, well, that’s how I make money.”

“She does, however, respect your skills,” Jess commented, which caused Bam to let out an amused chortle.

“Dude, she knows nothing about ‘my skills’ – ouch!”

The red-haired man had prodded Bam in the ribs, which had resulted in him doubling over in pain.

“Serves you just about right,” Jess huffed and then snickered at Bam’s reaction. “And what the hell, aren’t you supposed to be a daredevil? Lousiest excuse for one I’ve ever seen!”

“We’ll see about that!”

The skater reached for one of the pillows and gave his brother a sharp smack on the head. Jess was
far from fit – a bit of a couch potato – but he was both taller and brawnier than Bam, having been a drummer for the majority of his life. He easily outmaneuvered him by taking a hold of his wrists, though Bam was as agile as a monkey and used his legs to push him away. In the end, they collapsed on the floor, both of them laughing and wheezing breathlessly.

“Anyways, I was thinking of maybe putting up a skate ramp in the backyard,” the short-haired man said contemplatively and got up from the floor. “You could teach Sam how to master the skateboard. That’s what I meant by ‘skills’, by the way.

Bam nodded eagerly at the idea.

“Really?” he said, grinning widely. “Kelly isn’t afraid that she’ll break a few bones?”

“Yeah,” the older man muttered while scratching the back of his head. “… Let’s not use those exact words when telling her about it. She’d go bonkers.”

“But it’ll probably happen,” the brunet said, elbowing Jess in the side. “I’ll be there to pick her up though – I promise.”

Jess smirked. “With our genes, I don’t think it’ll be too much of a problem, Bam. She’ll be pain-defiant.”

The skater laughed at the mental images of little Sam, feeling carefree and happy. “Oh, man, she’ll be such a tomboy…” he pointed out, and then, as he realized that another rascal would terrorize April and Kelly, he wrinkled his forehead and offered Jess a sympathetic look. He added, “Let’s just hope she’ll inherit something from Kelly as well – some ladylike skills.”

“Yeah,” Jess said and scratched his beard, “wouldn’t count on it.”

Bam had spent his day on a skateboard. His effort earned him glowing praise from Jess, who stood by the skate ramp and watched, and while Bam felt somewhat rusty after a week or two without skating, he still basked in the glory of his obvious talent. Nothing was as thrilling as the adrenaline rush that followed the lure of danger. Of course, he had often experienced the consequences of a moment of reckless indiscretion. Physical pain was as familiar to Bam as pleasure, having lost count of all the fractured bones and concussions he had suffered in the name of passion. He had screamed, cried, puked and, above all else, he had laughed.

“Bam,” Jess said as soon as Bam sat down on the grass, exhausted and yet content, “I need to go and have a look at the house.”

Bam nodded. “Sure.”

“I’d ask you to join me, but I think it’ll be pretty boring.”

“Oh, yeah,” Bam said and ran a hand through his damp locks. His hair grew like weeds and kept falling into his eyes, which was impractical for someone as physically active as he was. He needed a haircut. Of course, he hated going into town for minor inconveniences. Maybe Missy would do it?

“Do that, bro. I think Kelly would’ve felt a bit weird about having me there anyways.”

“You mean after you painted Mom’s kitchen blue?”
“… Yeah.” Bam laughed. “And, um, it’s supposed to be bonding time for you guys, isn’t it? She wants to talk about what shade of pink she wants the nursery to be, and you’ll look at the samples and you’ll be like ‘what’s the fucking difference’, and then she’ll be all sad and start crying and-”

“Alright, alright,” Jess said and smacked him playfully over the head. “How do you know women better than I do? You’ve only been with Jenn-”

“Not just Jenn,” Bam muttered, interrupting his brother mid-sentence, and then got up from the grass. For a moment, he stared at the woods that surrounded his property. A thin smile touched his lips as he said, “He, um… he’s a bit of a girl. He’d get angry with me and do that whole hand-on-the-hip thing that girls do, and then his voice would get all shrill and… I don’t know, he’d tear up and I’d hug and kiss him, and it’d be good again.”

Jess was rendered speechless. He stared at his brother with a variety of conflicting emotions flickering in his eyes. Luckily, Kelly came to the rescue. She stepped out on the porch and yelled, “Jess!” at the top of her voice.

“Coming!” the ginger shouted, waving his hand at her.

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“Now, Jess!”

“I guess I’ll catch up with you later, Bam.”

“Sure. Go please the missus.”

Jess offered Bam an apologetic smile and ruffled his hair, though he made no comment about the wistful remembrance. Instead, he ran up to his pregnant wife and showered her with attention. He caressed her abdomen and pressed little kisses to her cheek and mouth, grateful to her and the future that awaited them.

Bam watched from a distance and wondered about his brother’s silence. For some reason, he did not feel offended. He had perhaps come to terms with how his brother would never be in favor of his past relationship with Ville, or maybe he was too tired to care? Either way, he deemed it unimportant. Now that Ville had left, the only thing remotely important in his life was his family, and in spite of the constant pangs of pain and nausea, he could not help but to smile. He thought about the little alien that had taken up residency inside Kelly’s stomach – baby Sam – and he felt nothing but happiness.

And yet, as the wind rustled through the leaves, he sighed and kicked the grass.

He heard someone approaching – he heard the sound of fabric rubbing together – and as he turned around and saw Ryan walking across the lawn, he smiled.

“Dunn!” Bam yelled and jumped the older man, causing both of them to tumble to the ground.

“Look who finally decided to join the world of the living,” the ginger said in a dry voice, completely unfazed by the violent greeting. “Now, are you feeling any better?”

Bam nodded eagerly and scrambled to his feet. “Kelly’s pregnant,” he said, pulling Ryan up from the grass.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Ryan grumbled, though his eyes gleamed with mirth. “I can’t imagine having another you running about, tackling me to the ground. I’ll be aching all over.”

Bam rolled his eyes. “And they’re naming her ‘Sam’. They’ve already bought Mr. Johnson’s
Ryan raised an eyebrow at the revelation. “And you’re fine with all of this?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

The question was followed by a surprised silence. When Bam failed to make the connection, Ryan let out an unamused laugh and said, “Indeed, Bam. Why wouldn’t you be?” and turned his attention to the skateboard that lay discarded on the ground. The pink HIM logo had become an eyesore; an unnecessary reminder. When Bam saw what he was looking at, his cheeks reddened and he kicked the skateboard, sending it flying toward the ramp.

“… What do I care?” he grumbled. “Willa left me – remember?”

“That he did,” Ryan said and walked over to where the skateboard had landed on the grass. As he retrieved it, the younger man started walking back toward the house, irked that everyone kept reminding him.

“Bam!” Ryan barked and followed him. Bam opened the door that led to the kitchen and then slammed it shut behind him. April, who was making dinner, jumped in surprise. She yelled, “What on earth is the meaning of this?” but Bam did not offer her an explanation. Just as he was about to dash up the stairs, the door swung open and Ryan stumbled inside, out of breath and with a wild look on his face.

“Bam,” he said and gripped Bam’s arm very hard, “you seriously can’t keep running away from me.”

“What the hell, Dunn?” Bam tore loose, but Ryan was persistent.

“Come on, dude,” the ginger muttered, taking a firm hold of his wrist. “We need to talk, okay? You’ve been avoiding me like I’m dog shit or something.”

April stepped between them, breaking them apart.

“Dear lord, what is going on with the two of you?” she asked and eyed them both wearily, fed up with the low spirits that haunted the house. “As if the last couple of months haven’t been hard enough on all of us, the two of you start quarreling!”

“He started it!” Bam said and pointed his finger at Ryan. The ginger rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, ’cause it’s my house!”

“Bam,” April said in a calm tone of voice, though it was not devoid of anger, “go to your room and take a few minutes to calm down, alright?”

Bam rolled his eyes and muttered, “Jeez,” before stomping up the stairs.

“Ryan, what on earth was that about?”

“I just don’t get how he can forgive Jess.”

“Oh, Ryan,” April said and nearly teared up at the memory of the family dinner. That had not been her eldest child’s finest moment. “I get that, and to be honest with you, I’ve been angry about that whole mess for a long, long time.”
The ginger scowled at her. “Then what the hell is he doing here?”

“Ryan, dear,” she whispered pleadingly, “if we were to discard everyone who hurts us at one point or another, we would’ve been all alone. Yes, Jess was being immature and hateful, but he has apologized. Of course, trust has to be earned, but one cannot earn back trust if one is not allowed a second chance. Don’t you agree?”

Ryan shrugged. “I guess. But I don’t like it.”

“It isn’t about you,” she said in a sad tone of voice, “it’s about Bam. He’s all alone right now.”

Ryan’s brows snapped together. “He isn’t alone.”

“He’s scared, Ryan,” she whispered, concern clouding her face and eyes. Over the last few weeks, she had felt inadequate. She had felt as if her skills as a mother had been lacking, and her son, her sweet baby, had been inconsolable.

“Scared?” he echoed. “Of what?”

She gave him a long look, wondering what thoughts were going through his head. “Bam’s never been very mature,” she began, her voice softer than silk, “and yet here he is. He has a big house, a big car… and he doesn’t know who to trust.” She sighed and cast a long, sideways glance at the oven; the chicken had taken a golden brown color and smelled heavenly. “And that’s another kind of loneliness, isn’t it? He’s used to having friends around all the time, but in the end, who can you really talk to?”

“Me,” Ryan grumbled. “He can talk to me ‘til the cows come home.”

April let out a chortle and said, “Of course. But after these last couple of weeks…” Her eyes glazed over; she drew in a sharp breath. “Well, I don’t think he wants to talk about Ville.”

“That’s what infuriates me,” the ginger said, raising his voice. “Ville isn’t well. I get that he’s been a dick, and I completely agree, but he isn’t well.” He paused for a moment as he studied her face, searching for traces of doubt. When he found none, he sighed and asked, “Why does everyone keep assuming things? No one has actually talked to him – not even Bam.”

April nodded. A bleak smile touched her lips as she thought about the Finn; the man who had swept her youngest off his feet and filled his life with joy, and indeed, it had been a beautiful time. Bam, who had been selfish and spoiled throughout his adolescent years, had showed both compassion and selflessness. He had grown – blossomed – and she had loved Ville for it; however, the addiction had undressed him. Once stripped of all the niceties, who was he? April had no definite answer, only that the alcohol had been in charge, and her son, so vulnerable where Ville was concerned, had been hurt.

“I understand what you’re saying, dear,” the blonde said, speaking in quiet tones, mindful of the thin walls. The same sad smile still clung to her lips, and when she continued by saying, “I understand completely because I adore Ville as much as you do,” she had to pull herself together to keep the tears at bay. “But it’s nearly been a month…”

Ryan snorted. “A month is nothing.”

“To Bam, a month is a lifetime,” she was quick to point out. “Besides, Ville’s basically just abandoned him, hasn’t he?” Upon saying those words, upon addressing the elephant in the room, she shook her head. “Ville simply isn’t cut from the same cloth as you and Bam. He’s…” Again, she shook her head. “He’s different. He’s got a different outlook on life, and I think… well, now that
Jess is back – now that Kelly’s pregnant, Bam’s opened his eyes to a few hard truths.”

“What d’you mean?”

She nibbled on her lower lip. “I shouldn’t tell you this, but he…” She paused, watching him closely. Ryan, who had been like a third son to her, looked troubled and hurt. Seeing this made her heart clench, wanting nothing more than to see her boys happy. But she realized that the Finn was dear to him, a close friend, and letting go was hard, even if it was for the best.

“Well,” she said quietly, “after Jess showed up, Bam went out with Missy.”

Ryan’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. He almost yelled, “Bam did what?”, causing April to jump.

“Keep your voice down,” she cautioned, afraid that Bam might be eavesdropping. Ryan treated her with a look of disappointment, and she was quick to say, “I just think he’s got a new sense of direction, and to be honest with you, Ryan, I think it’s much, much healthier.”

“… Than Ville?”

April nodded. “Let’s be honest with ourselves,” she said and sat down at the kitchen table. “Ville’s been a real mess, and I’m incredibly sorry to say so, Ryan. You know I adore Ville.” She paused and dried away unshed tears with a napkin, fearing that Ville had dug a hole too deep. “But the alcohol… the daytime drinking.”

“He’s not well, Ape.”

For a moment, she looked at him and smiled, proud of his endless compassion. After years of friendship, he loved Ville as a brother and would defend him beyond what was reasonable. April knew that, in a vast sea of conflicting emotions, it was her task to see beyond sentimental attachments. For all that Ville was a good guy – when sober, at least – Missy had it all.

“I know, but you’ve got to hear me out. Ville isn’t a healthy man, Ryan, and it’s like you say, he’s unwell, but…” She averted her gaze, ashamed to be uttering such words. “It shouldn’t be Bam’s responsibility. He might seem like he can handle pressure, and maybe he can, but not this emotional… I don’t even know what to call it – this hell he’s been going through. He’s just in need of something uncomplicated.”

“Uncomplicated,” Ryan echoed, his nostrils flaring. “Uncomplicated!”

“Ryan-”

“Jesus fucking Christ, what a bunch of hypocrites you all are!”

She frowned, surprised. “What?”

“Don’t you get it, Ape?” he whispered angrily. “I’ve stood by him this entire time – not you, not Jess – and I’ve seen him, Ape! Bam’s not ‘too uncomplicated’ for someone like Ville, no, and the only thing he’s afraid of is-”

“Keep your voice down,” the middle-aged woman said, casting a nervous glance in direction of the staircase. “I get that you’re angry, dear, but yelling won’t solve anything.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he muttered sourly. “If everyone’s going to be this fucking narrow-minded, to hell with it! I don’t care.”
“Ryan, please-”

“No,” he said in a dismissive tone of voice. For the first time in his adult life, he glared at her and said, “Ape, you’re wrong, and honestly, I think you’re being lame. I think everyone’s being lame – and accepting that fucking homophobe back into your lives?” He shook his head, frustrated with her and with Bam. “Well, talk about kicking someone while they’re down.”

“Ryan, don’t leave,” she whispered and got up from the chair. “Let’s be adults here.”

He let out an unamused laugh. “Yeah, let’s!”

With that said, Ryan made a hurried exit, slamming the veranda door shut in the process. April, who had never been the object of Ryan’s anger before, was confused. She understood how he felt about Ville; they all loved him; however, Bam was her child. Surely she had to protect him from all forces of evil? Alcoholism was, after all, a force of evil, and she had already seen a few signs already. Bam had started daytime drinking; he would sometimes imitate the Finn, walking around with a can of beer in his hand. Cigarettes would be next, and then what?

No sooner had Ryan left than the doorbell rang. April felt slightly annoyed. Would Bam’s friends never leave him alone? She felt as though Castle Bam had become a sanctuary for all sorts of outcasts and outsiders, a fact which did not sit well with her.

The doorbell rang for a second time. She sighed, pressed the button to open the gate, and then hurried over to the main door. There, on the doorstep, stood a willowy woman with chocolate locks and prominent cheekbones. Her full lips, pink and soft, curved into a friendly smile. She let out a quiet, “Hello, April,” and smoothed down her blouse, tucking it into her navy blue palazzo pants. “It’s so nice to see you.”

“Oh, Melissa, it’s nice to see you too,” April chirped and hugged the taller, younger woman. “Did Bam invite you over for dinner?”

“Yes, he only just called,” she said and let out a humored chortle. “Though I must confess, I thought he’d be doing the cooking.”

The middle-aged woman laughed heartily and said, “Oh my, then you’d be in for a real surprise.”

Both women started laughing and stepped inside the hallway. Melissa leaned down and started untying her shoelaces.

“Don’t bother,” the blonde said and smiled apologetically at the state of the floor. “He has a thousand friends coming over every day. Doesn’t matter how often I clean. I leave for five minutes and it looks like this again.” She rolled her eyes, though the affectionate smile lingered. “Those boys are impossible. I might as well give you a heads up – Bam isn’t much better than the rest of them.”

“Oh, I remember,” Melissa said and giggled. “I used to eat dinner at your place once or twice a week for a few years, didn’t I? God, I was such a tomboy back then.”

April hummed affirmatively. “Until you were about twelve. Bam found one of your tampons and realized you weren’t a boy-”

“You needn’t remind me, April.” She blushed. “He teased me about it for years.”

“Well,” April said and walked over to the kitchen counter, “he still hasn’t grown up, but I don’t think he’s quite as immature.”
Melissa did not respond to the remark, but when the middle-aged woman turned around and made eye contact, she noticed that her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes, a dark brown color with a slight hint of green, twinkled with delight. She shot a longing gaze toward the staircase and said, “I don’t mind,” and when she eventually tore her eyes from the dark wood, she smiled shyly at the older woman.

“I think your son has a lot of potential.”

A hopeful smile tugged at April’s lips. “Oh, I agree,” she trilled. Then, as she caught a whiff of something burning, she let out a horrified gasp and ran to the oven.

“Oh, shoot! I burned it!” she swore loudly while she tried to salvage the chicken, but as soon as it sat on the counter, black and crispy, even April had to admit defeat. She gave Melissa a sad look and said, “There’s no saving it, I’m afraid.”

The brown-eyed woman offered her a sympathetic smile and fished out her cellphone. “I’ll call the pizza place,” she offered, aware that her visit had caused some distraction. “I think I still remember Bam’s order – cheese, cheese and more cheese.”

April offered her a tender smile.

“It can never be cheesy enough.”

Summer was at its peak. Ville, who was as Finnish as they come, had never been fond of summertime, and while winter was admittedly cold and miserable, he still preferred cold and miserable to warm and miserable. He hated clammy nights, sunburnt skin and shorts with a passion, and Promises – the rehab center he had been admitted to – had been in Malibu. He shuddered at the thought. What had possessed him to go to the warmest, sweatiest desert in all the US? He smiled at his own stupidity, and as he gazed out the window and saw the green blur of trees and grass, he knew he had ventured far from the safe confinement of Promises. A blue sign said: ‘Welcome to West Chester’. Ville drew in a sharp breath.

“We will be arriving shortly, sir,” the driver said, nodding at the sign.

“Yes, thank you.”

As soon as he realized where they were, he closed his eyes and tried to remember his vows. Back at Promises, most of the patients took vows, solemnly swearing never again to drink alcohol; never again to beat their wives; never again to live in sin. Most of them had made their vows to God, whereas Ville had made his to Ozzy Osbourne, because what else could he have done? He had, of course, quarreled with the staff; a heathen from the deepest woods of Scandinavia would not make God a promise. He had told them, ‘If I were to make a vow in the name of a God that is as real and as relevant to me as Ronald McDonald, then surely I would break that vow?’ It had shut them up, though they had shaken their heads and dubbed him ‘the atheist’ from then onward.

Ville smirked in triumph at how he had outmaneuvered the sly bastards. If anything, they were religious sell-outs; the only real God of the American people was the green face of Benjamin Franklin on the one hundred-dollar bill. He had paid 25,000 dollars for a month. Well, their ‘company’, meaning the band, had paid 25,000 dollars for a month. It was, after all, more profitable than losing their number one rockstar. The threat had been real – was real – and his insides were as
charred as charcoal. Sobriety was essential to his recovery, and the weight of the sobriety coins in his wallet kept reminding him of the fact.

When they had been driving for another ten minutes, the sights of the outside world became more and more familiar. Ville realized they were getting closer. Soon he would see Castle Bam and its inhabitants.

“Um, sorry,” he said to the driver, smiling insecurely. “Could you pull over at a gas station? I just, uh, I need a coke – and some cigarettes.

“Oh of course, sir,” the middle-aged man said, chuckling. “I could use a cigarette break myself.”

Ville nodded. “Five minutes, then.”

Once they had pulled over at a Shell station, Ville hurried out of the car and ran inside the convenience store. He passed the shelves stacked with cigarettes and soda and rushed into the bathroom. There, he splashed his face with water and studied himself in the mirror, worried that he looked as haggard as he felt. And indeed, the once immaculate countenance was a bleak imitation of its former grandeur. His face was hollowed out and thin, his skin stretched around the skeletal features, and his eyes, once the crowning glory, were tired and sunken.

“Get a grip, Valo,” he muttered to himself. Bam had, after all, seen him from every possible angle – internal and external – and he had never judged him for any of his shortcomings. Ville felt dizzy all of a sudden. Bam had showered him with love and devotion, and how had he repaid him? He shuddered to think of his behavior earlier that month, which reminded him again of the vows he had made, the most important of which were to make amends.

He sat down on the floor and hugged his knees. In about ten minutes, he would be standing outside Castle Bam, and Bam would hate him for it. He had called Linde before his flight earlier that morning and had learned that the American was angry and disappointed. Of course, Ville had been too tangled in himself to think clearly; to understand that Bam would take his disappearance personally. On the night of the argument, Ville had sought refuge in drink. His memories were fragmented; however, he had woken up at the hospital. Seppo, his manager, had yelled at him over the phone, and Ville had broken down and spilled his guts. Then, within the blink of an eye, he had been in Malibu, sweating and swearing. Detox had been as awful as he had imagined.

People had held him down. He had been hallucinating and had seen his deceased grandmother, who had lectured him about good Finnish manners. She had been disappointed in him. What pathetic excuse for a Finn could not handle his vodka? She had shaken her head and said, “Child – what am I to tell your parents? Am I to tell them that you are dying?” In the end, no one had told his parents anything. He would like to keep it that way, because even if his innards were rotting, he knew he would get better. Standing face to face with death, there was but one option. He was not ready for the church bells just yet.

There was a knock on the door.

“Mr. Wallow?” he heard his driver ask. “Are you in there?”

Mr. Wallow. How fitting! Ville laughed and said, “Yes, I’ll be out in a minute.”

When they were once again seated in the car, Ville looked down at his hands and hoped that Bam would not reject his apology. Had he not been going through detox – and had he not been hallucinating and feverish – he would have called. Linde had said, ‘Bam thinks you’ve stopped loving him’, and nothing could have been further from the truth. But, to the fragments of a broken
heart, what did truth even matter? Ville remembered the heartache of loving Bam from afar. It had taken him months to realize that he had not been dreaming. Now, because of his illness, he might have lost it all.

11:15 a.m.  22.08.2007

Castle Bam was as it always had been. Birdsong came from the surrounding green forest, and Ville heard laughter; he heard familiar voices. He stood by the gate for a long time and watched the wooden door, ornamented with small skulls, vines and flowers, and thought about all the times he had walked through it with butterflies in his stomach.

He pressed the doorbell, and after two minutes, the gate opened. With his heart in his throat, he walked toward the door, and as he walked, he felt lightheaded. Before he reached the steps, the door swung open and Jess – out of all the people Ville had not expected to see – greeted him with a cold stare.

“Valo,” he said in a quiet voice and then closed the door behind him. “What are you doing here?”

Ville felt as though all air had been sucked out of his lungs. He wondered whether he would suffer from an asthma attack, or possibly an anxiety attack, whichever came first, but nothing happened.

“I, um…” he muttered, hugging himself with his arms. “I’m here to talk to Bam.”

Jess frowned. “No,” he said and shook his head. “No, you can’t just turn up like this. It’s been a month-“

“I’ve been to rehab,” Ville said, cutting him short, and while he was not particularly interested in sharing intimate details of his recovery with Jess, he knew it was necessary. The ox of a man stood between him and Bam, and the fact that Jess had even made it inside Castle Bam meant that something dramatic must have happened in his absence.

“I couldn’t have cared less,” Jess spat and walked down the stairs. Ville was by no means a short man, but Jess towered over him, playing the intimidation game. “D’you hear me, Valo? You can’t show up here after what you did!”

Ville arched an eyebrow. “Well, you apparently did the same.”

“I’m his brother,” he barked. “And I was right about you, wasn’t I? You’re a destructive motherfucker.”

Just then, the door opened for a second time, and Ryan, who had heard the shouting, stepped outside.

“What the hell are you doing-“

“The Finnish cunt is back.”

Ryan’s eyes widened at the mournful sight that met his eyes. Ville, once a beautiful man, was reduced to a skeleton; a living dead. He reminded him of the friends who had been lost to drugs; friends who had drowned and disappeared in the anonymous sea of the big cities. Yes, he had been a ghost a month ago, but during the weeks of absence, he had become even thinner and smaller. He wondered how his legs could even support him, or how the trembling limbs did not fall apart.
“Jess,” Ryan said while eying the Finn, “go fetch Bam, okay? And I mean right now.”

“Dunn, you can’t be serious?”

Ryan closed his eyes and muttered something unintelligible under his breath. When he opened them again, he said, “You’ve got to understand that this isn’t our decision to make – and no, I don’t fucking care what arguments you have, just go get Bam.”

The drummer looked as though he was contemplating murder. But, when Ryan fixed him with a frightening glare, he grunted and complied. The moment the door shut behind him, Ryan walked down the stairs and put his arms around the Finn, hugging him.

“… You have no idea how fucking worried we’ve all been,” he whispered hoarsely.

“I’m sorry, Ryan,” he answered mechanically. “I wasn’t… wasn’t myself.”

The hug ended. Ryan bit his lower lip and shook his head. “He’s… oh, fucking hell, Valo! Bam’s been a crying mess since you left. I honestly don’t know how he’ll react to-"

“Whatever the consequences might be, I’m here,” the green-eyed man said in a voice that was as firm as it was weak. “I hurt him. He’s entitled to feel whatever it is that he feels.” Upon saying the latter, his eyes became watery. Ryan, who had already witnessed what the separation had done to Bam, now saw the same destruction reflected in Ville’s green orbs.

Before Ryan could add anything to the conversation, the door was again opened and Bam, who looked thoroughly confused, stood in the doorway. When his eyes landed on the Finn, an indefinable sound escaped him, and he trembled. At first, he struggled to comprehend that this man – this shell of a man – was in fact Ville. And when he did, he threw himself at him and held him tightly, afraid that he might evaporate.

“You-fucking-stupid-motherfucking-idiot!” he yelled in an exasperated explosion of words. Then, as soon as the anger melted into sorrow, he started sobbing. Ville was as stiff as a poker, completely unprepared for the emotional reunion, and tears soon started falling from his own eyes. He blinked and blinked, but nothing could keep them away. Soon, both men were sobbing loudly while clinging to one another, terrified and yet relieved.

“I-I’m sorry, Bam,” he whispered brokenly while stroking down the younger man’s back. “Truly.”

Bam suddenly pushed him away, and Ville, in his weakened state, struggled to keep his balance, though he did not fall. Ryan watched awkwardly from afar and wondered whether or not he should interfere, but he reminded himself of what Bam had gone through over the last few weeks. He had been abandoned, and while Ryan loved Ville like a brother, he knew that Bam had every right to be angry. With this in mind, he decided to make himself scarce.

“Bullshit!” the skater yelled, face flushed and fists clenched at his sides. “You fucking dickhead!”

“… Bammie-"

“Don’t ‘Bammie’ me – don’t you dare!”

“Bam,” Ville said in a shaky voice, “I mean it.”

“No!” Bam shouted, his eyes smoldering with hatred. “You don’t fucking mean it, you piece of shit!”
Silent tears ran down the older man’s cheeks. As he opened his mouth, he tasted the salt and was reminded of the bitterness that polluted the air between them. It was his fault, of course, and while he wanted to make amends, he knew that Bam had to open his heart to the possibility of forgiving. Gazing into his eyes, he knew that such a thing was unrealistic. He had never thought that Bam would reject him. Was it selfish of him to think that way? He supposed that it was. Love did not derive from nothing and was not maintained by running away from it, and that was Ville’s biggest mistake.

“Bam,” he said again while holding his gaze, “I love you. I will never stop loving you, and because of that simple fact, I am really, really sorry to have hurt you. I hate myself for having done that to you.” His eyes were burning and his chest was impossibly heavy, almost as if his heart had become lead. “P-please, don’t leave me. I will do anything. Just say the words.”

The skater, at a sudden loss for words, sank to his knees and cried. Ville noticed that April was staring at them from the living room window, and her eyes, normally warm and loving, were filled with rage. He swallowed thickly and kneeled down next to the young man’s shivering body.

“Bam,” he said, wrapping him in his arms, but Bam swatted him away, nearly falling over in the process.

“No!” the skater screamed and gave him one final push to the chest. The singer felt his legs cave in and he fell on the hard asphalt. His palms and knees burned.

“… Willa,” Bam whispered hoarsely and crawled over to where the Finn lay motionless on the ground.

“Willa, are you alright?” he asked and put a trembling hand on the thin man’s shoulder. Ville rolled onto his back and watched the tearful eyes of his beloved. The customary playfulness had long since evaporated from the blue irises. There was a deadness to them – a tint of disappointment and apathy – that had never been there before. Ville frowned. Had he done this? Bam, the happiest, loveliest creature in all the world, had been broken down, and for what? His carelessness. His selfishness. The thought was unbearable.

“I-I…”

Bam cradled his head in his lap and clasped his hand around Ville’s wrist; around the heart tattoo.

“You’re unbelievable,” the skater muttered and glared down at the skeleton, though he found it hard to hate someone as pitiful as Ville. “You know that, right? Fucking unbelievable!”

Ville propped himself up on his elbows and eventually managed to get back on his feet. He extended a hand to the skater, but he did not react. He hoisted himself up without Ville’s help.

“Why did you come back?” he demanded.

“… I wound up in the hospital, Bam,” the older man explained. “Everything went downhill from there – or uphill, heck if I know…” He let out an unamused laugh and looked down at his feet, ashamed and angry with himself for having lost touch with reality. Toward the end, the alcohol had eaten his sanity. “I just somehow ended up in Malibu. Went straight to detox.” His eyes darkened at the admittance. “And I talked to Linde, Bam. I know what you’re thinking, but I haven’t stopped… haven’t stopped loving you. I just – I wasn’t myself. I was sick.”

Bam glared him down. “D’you know how many times I called? And I told that fucking receptionist twat that I had to see you – or at least talk to you – but no! You didn’t want to!”
“Be glad you didn’t get to talk to me while I was there, Bam. You would have been even more worried.”

“Well, you know what? I don’t even give a damn right now.”

Ville closed his eyes. “I find that hard to believe.”

The skater’s lower lip trembled as he said, “It’s true, Walo. I-I’m out. D’you get that? I’m… I’m out.”

Ville had to lean against the wrought iron bannister for support. His limbs felt soft and wobbly, almost like jelly, and he could not move them; could not control them. As he gazed up from his feet and locked eyes with the man he loved – the man who was now rejecting him – he felt dazed.

“I-I…” he stuttered. “Bam, no, you can’t… no-no-no.”

Bam hugged himself with his arms and said, “It’s how it is, Walo.”

“It’s Jess, isn’t it?” the Finn asked. Quiet intensity shone in his eyes, suspicious of the older brother. Bam had always adored him and had been depressed after the family dinner, and while he had never even considered forgiving him while they were together, the month apart had changed everything.

“Oh, I know it’s Jess,” Ville whispered miserably. “I knew he’d poison you with his lies-”

“D’you remember all the horrible things you said to me last month, Willa?” the skater asked, conjuring up images of their verbal arguments. All of them stemmed from the same source – the alcoholism – but Bam considered it a lousy excuse. Had the hounds of hell dragged him off the face of the earth, he still would have had the decency to call. In his mind, nothing justified Ville’s silence. He simply had not been bothered to let him know that he was alright. It really did speak volumes about their relationship.

“… What do you want me to do, Bam?” Ville mumbled and then sank to his knees. “Bam, please. I beg you.”

Bam let out a pained laugh and then sat down on the steps and said, “Begging won’t change anything. Don’t be stupid, Willa. It’s pathetic.”

“Bam,” he said. “Oh, Bam-Bam. I have to be. I-I can’t just accept… No, you have to know that I will fight for you – I love you.” He put a pale and bony hand on Bam’s knee and repeated, “I love you,” under his breath, but Bam swatted the hand away and got back on his feet.

“What do you want me to do?” the Finn asked again. “Bam.”

The skater clasped his hands behind his neck groaned. As he looked down at the singer’s tearstained face and saw the despair reflected in his eyes, he said, “Willa, that’s enough. Get up. Get the fuck up!”

Ville bit his lip and, for a moment of hesitation, glanced sideways toward the woods. An overwhelming sense of powerlessness swept over him like a dark wave. His skin tingled with anxiety, and he was painfully aware that nothing he could say or do would close the gap between them, not when Bam had already made up his mind. The older man let out a sob, unable to choke it back down again. Tears were shimmering in his green eyes, but he would not let them fall, not now. Then, as the silence became overwhelming, blocking out all other noise, he whispered, “I’m sorry, Bam. I-I… I didn’t mean to do it.”
Bam swallowed thickly, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “Just get up, Willa.”

The Finn did not speak as he gripped the bannister, pushing himself to his feet. He wobbled for a second before steadying himself again.

“You ought to go back to Finland now, Willa,” Bam said in a hushed voice. “Your folks are probably worried out of their minds. Go make things right with them, alright? Just – you can’t be here.”

Ville’s eyes glazed over. “Bam, no,” he said and let out a gut-wrenching sob that made the younger man avert his gaze. “You can’t just throw it all away – you can’t. It isn’t just your decision to make!”

The skater let out a laugh and then raked his fingers through his hair. His thoughts were racing.

“I can’t deal with all this bullshit anymore!” Bam shouted angrily. “I feel so fucking horrible, you know? All the time. Every second of every day, I feel horrible.” Tears sprang from his eyes; he did nothing to conceal them. “I’ve just hated myself – hated you – and I can’t deal with it anymore. I’ve had enough.”

Ville felt as though the last little thread of hope that had held him together was coming undone. He reached for Bam’s hand, but the younger one drew it back and said, “No,” in a firm tone of voice. The look on his face was hard and menacing, but Ville still through him like water running down the drain; he saw a small flicker of doubt in his eyes, and while it was not much, it was something to hold on to.

“Bam-”

“You need to leave,” the younger man snapped. “Okay, dude? I don’t want you here – d’you get that? Just go back home to Finland and leave me the fuck alone!”

The green-eyed man shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “Bam, I know you. You still feel for me.”

Bam’s eyes flashed, anger twisting his features. “Oh, without a fucking fight? I thought you were dead, Willa,” he said accusingly and folded his arms over his chest. “I went looking, you know. For weeks on end. I drove around and looked for you in ditches, back alleys and dumpsters, ‘cause I thought some maniac had kidnapped you or some crazy shit like that,” he said, lowering his voice to a whisper. “And I blamed myself. Blamed myself for your bullshit.”

“I wasn’t in my right mind-”

“None of it matters anymore!” Bam nearly shouted, eying the Finn as though his patience was running low. “It’s over, Willa. Now, if you don’t get off my property, I will call the cops on you.”
The older man let out a dry laugh that gradually melted into a sob. Was his Bammie really threatening him.

“Fine,” he said in an almost inaudible whisper. “I-I… I guess this is it, then?”

Upon hearing the stuttering words, Bam’s features softened.

“… Oh, fucking hell, Willa,” he cried bitterly and pulled the taller man in for another desperate hug. Ville, who was thoroughly confused by Bam’s sudden change in behavior, put his arms around him and felt that dangerous flicker of hope in his chest. Holding Bam close, he relished the feel of his warmth and buried is nose in the soft curls on his head, inhaling the familiar scent of him; earthy and masculine, unmasked by perfume or cologne. It somehow smelled like home.

“Bam?” he whispered as soon as the sobs had been reduced to sniffles. “Are you…”

“No, I-I, no,” Bam said, though his voice was muffled by Ville’s shirt. “I’m sorry, Willa. I just needed to… I…”

The skater pulled back and started nibbling on his lower lip, ashamed that he had let his guard down. When he gazed up and saw the hopeful look on the older man’s face, he let out a deep, shuddering breath and dried tears and snot from his face. He never should have hugged him, never should have let him get his hopes up, but he felt as though they were running to the edge of the world. Once there, they would leap into the great unknown – a world bereft of each other – and it was terrifying.

“This is it, Willa,” he whispered with his eyes focused on an empty space in the air between them. “This is the end of the road for you and me.”

The Finn, in spite of the bottomless blackness that ate away at him from the inside, smiled. It was one of those signature smiles of his – lopsided and charming – and yet his eyes were brimming over with tears. He tried to look at Bam, to savor these last moments of their life together, but his vision was blurred with tears. Using the sleeve of his shirt, he dried them away. The smile never wavered on his lips though, and his green eyes held Bam’s blue ones steadily, remembering the very first time he had laid his eyes on the little American in the dressing room.

“I-I wish you all the best, Bam. I’m…” He paused and drew in a shaky breath. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’ve let you down. I’ve hurt you terribly. You deserve all the love in the world – you do. And I’m… I’m sorry.”

Bam grimaced. “Me too, Willa,” he said quietly and nodded in direction of the car. “Good luck.”

Ville, who still wore the same unrelenting smile on his face, laughed and said, “Thanks.” In the slow, speedy seconds that followed, he took in the sight of Castle Bam for a final time and remembered the laughs, the kisses and caresses they had shared behind its safe walls. “And thank you for all the lovely memories. This time with you has meant everything to me…”

The skater did not answer, though his eyes darkened at the words. It struck him that this was a closing chapter. For the first time in his life, he had to say goodbye to someone he had actually cared about. But the face in front of him was almost unrecognizable, thin and transparent, and he knew that it did not belong to the person he had fallen for. It was monstrous to think that this was the same Ville he had loved tenderly; the same Ville who had held him in his arms; the same Ville whose gentle voice had lulled him to sleep. It was impossible.

“Goodbye,” Bam said in a cold voice – was it really his voice? He did not recognize it, so harsh and uncaring, and Ville, who was not used to seeing this side of the skater, flinched.
“Bye,” he whispered hoarsely in return, pale and yet flushed. The sting of rejection and loss overwhelmed him; he felt dizzy again. Out of sheer will power, he managed not to sway on his feet, but even so, the world around him seemed to be spinning. He still held onto the bannister.

“Again, I wish you all the best, Bammie…”

“… You too, Willa…”

As the green-eyed man turned around, the façade cracked open like frozen bodies of water during the spring thaw. Tears rolled down his face and he gasped for air, feeling as though he was drowning. Behind him, he heard the door being slammed shut. The sound made his stomach churn. He wanted to turn around and knock until his fists were raw and Bam had changed his mind, but his legs moved of their own volition and carried him toward the gate. A couple of minutes later, Ville sat like a statue in the backseat of the car. In spite of the myriad of emotions that coursed through his body, he sat still and stared blankly ahead of him. The driver twisted around to give him a once-over, but upon seeing the blank look on his face, he simply asked, “Where to, Mr. Wallow?”

Ville started laughing; he started crying.

“Sir?” The cabbie looked uncomfortable. “Sir, please. Are you alright?”

Ville blinked a few times, realizing how awkward the situation was for the driver. He then gathered himself with as much dignity as he could muster, but of course, he was too tired to pull it off. He smiled apologetically at the older man and said, “To the airport,” in an almost firm voice.

“Alright, sir.”

The Finn let out a misplaced chuckle. “Or, well, the airport hotel,” he said, correcting himself. “I don’t actually have a ticket yet.”

“The airport hotel it is.”

The car started moving. Ville gazed out the back window, catching a last glimpse of the tall wooden fence and the gateway. There, with a sad look on his face, stood Ryan Dunn. He waved and mouthed ‘goodbye’, which was enough to push Ville over the edge. Without the strength to produce another charming smile, he let out a loud sob that startled the cabbie, though he made no comment. As they drove away, Ryan became smaller and smaller, and in the end, he disappeared completely. Ville continued to cry unashamedly for the rest of the drive. Once he reached the hotel, he sat down at the bar and ordered a whiskey on the rocks.
Bam wore a new and expensive shirt, and he slipped on a pair of shoes that had gathered dust in the back of his closet for years, the kind of shoes one wears for formal events. He then combed his hair and looked at himself in the mirror, and as he regarded himself, he could not help but to wonder where all the lines on his face had come from. Age was beginning to creep up on him, and he could not help but to grimace upon noticing that his hair was flecked with the odd strand of gray. Time had stolen much from him and rewarded him with little.

When he had finished dressing up and felt reasonably satisfied with himself, he walked over to the bedroom and found the picture of Ville. He slipped it into an envelope and carried it in his hand down to the car.

“Buckle up,” he whispered to himself and sat the picture down in the passenger seat. For a couple of minutes, he simply sat there with his hands on the steering wheel; his knuckles were white and there was a crease between his brows. He closed his eyes and inhaled sharply, and then he turned on the radio. The sound of Britney Spears’s high-pitched voice coaxed a smile from the skater. While he loathed pop music, he did not change the radio station for the duration of the drive.

Bam eventually pulled over at a grocery store. He swiftly ran inside and purchased a bouquet of flowers and a beer, one of his old favorites, and then hurried back to the car. His stomach was in knots, and as he reached his destination, he found himself unable to move. The music ended abruptly as he killed the engine. Suddenly the silence became too much, but as he threw a nervous glance out the window, he realized that the silence belonged. He had parked his car in parking lot across the street from the cemetery, and as he watched the gothic scenery with his heart in his throat, he felt the familiar self-hatred running through his veins. Old men and women entered and exited the gilded gates, paying their loved ones a visit. Bam, on the other hand, had avoided the place for years.

“… Shit,” the skater whispered under his breath. He was a bundle of nerves.

When he had finally plucked up the courage to leave the car, he walked slowly and solemnly toward the gate on the opposite side of the street. It was in the middle of June, but the sky was bleak and gray. A soft breeze blew at his short brown hair, and he brushed it from his face. He sighed when he realized that he did not remember exactly where the gravestone stood, and he had to walk back and forth a couple of times before his eyes landed on a familiar stone. It was black and had golden letters on it, letters that spelled Ryan’s name and said what a wonderful fellow he had been.

Bam put the flowers down. Seeing Ryan’s picture on the stone, he suddenly felt overdressed. Moreover, he felt ridiculous about having brought him flowers. The truth was that he had not visited
the grave since the funeral, and apart from Ryan, Bam had not suffered many personal losses. He did not know how to behave, and that was why he had bought the flowers.

“So,” Bam said and scratched his chin. He heaved a sigh, annoyed with himself for being emotional and insecure. “I… uh, I’m sorry. I should’ve visited sooner, I know, but… things have been rough. I don’t even know what to tell you, man.”

As he stood there, awkwardly fiddling with his wristwatch, he closed his eyes and whispered, “I don’t even know what to say.” His grip on the flower bouquet tightened. For a moment, he could have sworn to have seen locks of red out of the corner of his eye, but as he turned around, he saw nothing. But when he looked back at the stone, it appeared to have vanished. In its place stood a man with red hair and smiling eyes.

“Oh, you’re the one who’s been having a rough time,” Ryan grumbled in spite of the amused smile that tugged at his lips. “It’s been six years, you asshole. And you bring me roses! Fucking roses!”

Bam smiled sadly in response. “I don’t even know why I bought fucking flowers, man. It’s… it’s just what people do. Isn’t it?”

The ginger rolled his eyes melodramatically. “You’re not people, Bam,” he said, though it sounded like a reassurance. “Or maybe you hit your head a little too hard?” He smiled then, and he shook his head and put his hand on Bam’s shoulder. “Don’t think about it, dude. I’ll never be angry with you – just for the fucking roses.”

Bam’s lower lip quavered. He managed to choke back a sob, but he found himself unable to fight the tears that burned hotly behind his eyes. Memories of old resurfaced and played themselves out before his mind’s eye. He felt overcome with grief and guilt.

“Jeez!” he yelled and buried his face in his hands. “This isn’t fucking right, Dunn, and you fucking know it – you know I can’t deal with being all on my own. It isn’t right!”

“You went to Spain, didn’t you?” the ghost argued. “Everyone needs to grow the fuck up, Bam, and I think you’re well on your way. You don’t need me to hold your hand.”

“… I still fucking need you, you fucking asshole.”

Ryan shook his head. “You can do this, Bam,” he argued. “You’re Bam Margera – You can do whatever the fuck you want, remember?” There was a huge smile on his face as he said the latter, and then he sat down on the ground. His fingers brushed against the stone. “Besides, I’m not exactly going anywhere. I’m still rooting for you. Always am.”

Bam heaved a sigh of frustration. He sat down on the wet grass and glared at the golden letters. It was easier to feel rage and bitterness than it was to feel the maddening sadness that had shrouded his life ever since the car crash. Six years had passed. Bam had to laugh as realization hit him hard, because it was an outrageous thought, one that made him crumble. Six years had indeed gone by, but those years were nothing short of an eternity. He suddenly understood where those lines had come from.

“… You never should’ve gotten into that car, Dunn,” he whispered and touched the cold surface of the gravestone. “T’was fucking stupid. I know you used to call me a stupid moron for the shit I pulled back in the day, but what you did… fucking drinking and driving…” He paused, trying unsuccessfully to swallow the knot in his throat. “T’was beyond just stupid.”

Ryan looked at Bam with a somber expression on his face. While his eyes were the same crystal blue
color they had always been, the sorrow reflected in them was new. It was not guilt or shame, but it was a profound sense of sadness that touched the depths of Bam’s soul. It did not matter that Bam was right about the bad decisions Ryan had made – the decisions that had taken two lives – because the past was now set in stone. Ryan offered him an apologetic smile and said, “I told you about the good days I had left, Bam. They were just icing.”

“And what about my good days, huh?” the forlorn man wondered out loud and dried tears from his eyes. “There are none! And that’s on you, Dunn. D’you hear me?”

Ryan folded his arms over his chest. “You need to get your head out of your ass, Bam. You’re still breathing, aren’t you? Go have fun. You’re not supposed to mourn me by killing yourself, you’re supposed to honor my memory by having all the fun in the world. Can’t you go out and do that?”

Bam shook his head. “What’s the point?”

No one could answer that. Even if there had been a God, he would not have been able to answer that. Everyone had their own reality and their own personal truth, and to Bam, all of it had simply come to an end six years ago. After Ville had exited his life as abruptly as he had entered it, all Bam had known was Ryan. Ryan had been a constant presence in his life for so many years – they had been brothers’ – and then it had ended. It had ended with no reasonable explanation. Bam had been in shock, and if he were to be honest, he still was. He still woke up some mornings and felt excited about silly, little things he needed to tell Ryan, and then it would dawn on him. The first few months had been bad; he had called Ryan’s number on more than one occasion. When it had gone to voicemail, he had been fooled by the ‘hey, it’s Ryan…’ part and started talking.

“You’ve come too far to give up, you big idiot,” the ginger said encouragingly. “I know I should’ve gone down the same road – rehab and all that shit. But you know what, I wasn’t strong enough to do that. I wasn’t strong enough to admit that I had a problem. I’m sorry though.” He paused and bit his lower lip in a thoughtful manner. “Never thought I’d be the main source of your pain, Bam. Never aimed to be.”

“… I wish you were here,” Bam eventually said and felt his throat tighten again. He remembered all the times Ryan had stood by his side and grabbed him by the collar. Whenever Bam had lost what little remained of his self-control, Ryan had been there to help. “I miss you. We all fucking miss you…” he faltered as his voice shattered. “W-we think about you… we think about you every fucking day, Dunn.”

For a couple of minutes, both Bam and the ghost inside his head kept their mouths shut. Bam then realized that he still held the envelope in his hand. He fished out the photo and willed a trembling smile to his lips.

“I still can’t believe you kept it for all those years,” he whispered and laughed, knowing that Ryan would have cracked up upon seeing the yellowing, water damaged photo of Ville Valo striking a sexy pose. After they had gotten to know Ville, they had both understood that the sexualized stage persona was quite different from the introverted private person who hid behind catlike eyes and pouty lips.

Ryan raised one eyebrow. “I see I should’ve kept it a wee bit longer.”

“Nikki washed my clothes… she didn’t go through the pockets first, or maybe she did and got a bit jealous, what do I know?” The dark-haired man’s eyes sparkled playfully as he mentioned the small accident.

Ryan laughed. “Of course she got jealous. Ville’s the one for you and you know it, you fucking
“Willa’s on tour. HIM’s having their last tour ever-”

“And you’re here?” Ryan shouted, clearly appalled. “You ought to go see them! Don’t be a coward – you’re fighting the alcohol – you can fight this too! Besides, aren’t you dying to see that beautiful motherfucker again?

“… I’m going to text Linde,” the thirty-seven-year-old promised and got up from the wet grass. He realized he had gotten grass stains on his pale gray suit, but he found that he did not care; he could buy another one. “I’ll keep you updated. Won’t be another six years before I show up again, that’s for sure.”

Ryan smirked. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” he said and punched Bam playfully in the arm. The moment they touched, Ryan and his good-humored smile vanished into thin air.

Bam knew he had been making up the entire conversation. He heaved another sigh, tired of mourning Ryan’s death, and raked his fingers through his curls. The smiling face on the gravestone reminded him of all the laughs they had never gotten to share, and he shook his head and reminded himself that Ryan would have wanted him to move on. If it had been the other way around, Bam would have wanted that for him.

“I love you, man,” Bam whispered, and he could have sworn to have felt a lingering touch on his shoulder upon saying the words. A sob fell from his lips, and he hugged himself with his arms. In that moment, and in spite of the fact that he was an atheist to the core, he hoped that he would see Ryan again in some shape or form. The nothingness of death seemed too impossible to accept.

Before he left, Bam popped open the beer bottle with his car key and poured the beer over the dying roses. As he drove away from the cemetery, he felt as though a heavy burden had been lifted off his shoulders. However, the photo of Ville still stared at him with a hollow eye from the passenger seat. He had not completed his journey, not yet, and he nibbled on his lower lip as he thought about the text message he had to write. But what exactly did one write after ten years of nothing?

16:09 p.m.         12.06.2011

It was a beautiful summer’s day. Ryan and Bam sat in the garden and had a few beers while chatting away about life. They felt nostalgic about the good old days, and they began talking about the time before Jackass when they had been even younger and stupider. They talked what it had been like growing up in West Chester, and Ryan casually shared that if he ever were to have kids, they would be raised in the exact same way as they had been; with too little supervision and no actual rules. And as they sat there, reminiscing about well spent days of raising hell, they realized that they had accomplished more than most people by simply being the assholes they were. They had to share a laugh about that.

“Man, I feel like a pensioner,” Ryan commented and gave a loud and hearty laugh. “I feel like the good days I have left are just icing.”

Bam smiled. “There’ll be plenty of those,” he said reassuringly and clinked his beer bottle with Ryan’s. “And I’m happy for you, man. You’ve got a good girl and a good life.”

The bearded man went silent at the words. Everyone knew that Bam and Missy were struggling and fought about pretty much everything imaginable. Ryan actually felt sympathy for Missy. He knew
Bam better than he even knew himself, and he realized that Bam could not be easy to live with, especially if Missy had hoped for a passionate marriage. Being the beautiful thing she was, she had probably hoped for more, and Bam had not lived up to the expectations.

“Actually, Bam, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that,” he said and gave his best friend a somewhat stern look. “You’ve been pretty low lately, haven’t you?”

Bam shrugged. “Missy fucking hates my guts. She’s been talking about divorce a few times… I dunno, maybe it’d be for the best at this point.”

“Probably,” Ryan mused, his brows drawn together in thoughtful consideration.

“You think?” Bam laughed nervously. “I don’t know, man. I’m just… I’d be glad to have some peace and quiet again.” He pressed his hand to his cheek and watched Ryan out of the corner of his eye, curious and yet worried about what went through his mind. “Doesn’t matter what I do, really, she yells at me anyway. She even moved out of the bedroom last month.”

“Bam,” Ryan said and began searching for something in his hip pocket. After a couple of seconds, he fished out a piece of paper that looked ancient, yellowed and faded by time. He held it contemplatively in his hand for half a second, somewhat hesitant, but as he gazed into Bam’s befuddled eyes, all hesitation abandoned him.

“Here, it’s yours,” he murmured and handed the mysterious piece of paper to Bam, who looked more than a little lost, but he accepted it nonetheless.

“The hell, Dunn?” Bam muttered as he studied the tattered picture that had been damaged by both water and time; however, the condition of the picture was not what surprised him the most, it was what it depicted. He put his hand over his mouth and wrinkled his forehead, and then he whispered, “… The hell, Dunn?” under his breath.

“How d’you feel about seeing it again?” Ryan wanted to know, but he had not actually needed to ask that question. Tears shimmered in the skater’s eyes, and as he gazed down at a familiar face, something dark reached his eyes. He looked as though someone had taken a sledgehammer to his chest – breathless and speechless – and for a couple of minutes, none of them said a word.

“I can’t fucking believe you kept it for all these years,” he whispered after some time, his voice raw and hoarse as he tried to push away the painful memories that followed the photo. His lower lip was suddenly trembling, and he found that he was no longer capable of keeping up appearances. Tears were streaming down his face, trickling down to the short beard. “W-why?”

“Because I knew it was important to you,” the older man said and shrugged, almost as if he could not have cared less about the emotional havoc he had caused. “I knew it then and I know it now, even if you’ve forgotten it over the years…” He swallowed thickly as he said this. “… I’ve remembered it for you.”

The picture was as familiar as it was unfamiliar, almost like the faint memory of a dream that was beginning to fade into oblivion, but he recognized it fully now that he saw it again. He had often thought about it, and he had sometimes tried to conjure up the memory. Seeing it again brought on a lot of different memories, and even the best of those memories were painful to dip into.

“Fuck, man,” Bam whispered and then started crying. “I-I haven’t thought about him in ages…”

“That’s the biggest load of bullshit I’ve ever heard, Bam, and that says a lot.”

Bam laughed in spite of himself. “Maybe, but it’s kinda true.”
“Well, true or not true, he’s a huge part of your life. Unless you become diagnosed with severe dementia, I don’t think he’ll just disappear.”

The younger man nodded, though he said nothing further, he simply glanced down at the picture of Ville Valo he had first seen more than ten years ago. The memory felt like a scene from a movie he had watched half a lifetime ago; it was fuzzy to say the least. While he did remember that he had been spellbound by the Finnish rocker, he could not for the life of him remember why he had kept the photo, and furthermore, he definitely could not understand why Ryan had decided to keep it.

“He ruined everything,” Bam said with a hard edge to his voice. “Fucking everything.”

The ginger said nothing, he merely watched his friend’s face as it was contorted by rage and grief for a happiness that had dissolved so long ago. Now the ruins of that time were all that remained standing, and while they had tried to build around those ruins for nearly four years, every attempt had turned out to be futile. In the end, nothing could compare to the previous glory of those ruins. All other things stood in their shadow.

“You don’t seriously want me to talk to him ever again, do you?”

Ryan shrugged. “That hasn’t got anything to do with me, Bam.”

“Well, you kept the fucking picture, Dunn.”

“I kept it safe,” he stated with a weary smile on his lips. “You would’ve just tossed it out.”

That was true. Bam had burned everything that had reminded him of Ville, even the antique bed he had owned at the time of the breakup. He remembered that night quite vividly; he had been shitfaced and drunk on sorrow. But years had passed since then, and while it still hurt to think about, he did not feel the same hatred toward Ville. All that remained of that old hatred was a dull ache he refused to acknowledge. It only hurt when he thought about it, and Bam never had time to sit down and think about the past. He was never alone and never bored, and thinking deeply was for lonely poets and artists, not for busy skaters.

“Why did you show it to me?” Bam asked and brushed away tears from his cheeks.

“It explains everything, doesn’t it?” Ryan smiled, well aware that Bam already knew his intentions. “I know you’ve been avoiding him, Bam, and I think that’s why your marriage stinks. You never wanted to be with her in the first place, as was the case with Jenn and all those chicks.”

Bam let out a strained laugh. “You’re wrong, Dunn.” He shook his head. “So fucking wrong.”

The ginger looked at him for a long time after that, and while it was not a scrutinizing stare, it was still intense enough for the brunet to look down at his feet. The older man sighed and decided to drop the subject.

“D’you wanna order a pizza or something?” Ryan asked instead, because he knew Bam well enough to understand that pushing him would get them nowhere. It would only lead to more misery. He had carried out the self-imposed task of keeping the photo out of harm’s way and handing it back to Bam, as he had decided to do many years ago, and he was done meddling in Bam’s affairs.

“Fuck yeah!” Bam said after a long moment of silence; he had needed time to pull himself together. He once again managed to smile that unique smile of his, the one that was about as contagious as the flu. “Pizza is life, man.”

Ryan chuckled. Underneath all the misery and the obvious self-deception, Bam was still Bam, but
the world had ceased to be black and white, even to him. The Bam who had read that airline magazine ten years ago had been young and naïve, and that had changed. It struck him that their golden days were long gone. They were supposed to be adults now. For the briefest of moments, the older man wondered what was left. The childhood was certainly gone, though whenever he saw that smile on Bam’s face, he felt as though he was fourteen years old again. It was a nice feeling.

Ryan, in spite of his thoughtfulness, called the pizza place. From the moment he turned around to focus on the conversation rather than his friend, Bam stuffed the old picture in the front pocket of his hoodie. He thought about green eyes and Mona Lisa smiles, and for a split second, he wondered where Ville was right then and there. He wondered if he ever thought about their time together, or if he would rather forget the romance that had gone awry. With all that had happened during those last few months, he hoped that he had managed to move on to something healthier – that the drinking had stopped – and the thought somehow made him feel guilty.

The dreary thoughts quickly vanished once Ryan asked what topping he would like, even if he knew the order by heart, and neither of them mentioned Ville or the picture for the rest of the evening. They tried to look ahead.
Time had been kind to Angie. She was the same stunning woman Bam remembered her as, the one Ryan had been fortunate enough to stumble across, though she was no longer his girlfriend. Angie had a wedding ring on her finger. The swell of her stomach foretold about the happy event she and her husband were expecting, and her face glowed with health and happiness. Bam immediately regretted the visit, and he wanted to walk away, but he was already standing in the driveway of their perfect little house. And as Bam had already predicted, the moment Angie turned around and saw him standing in her yard, her face fell like the city of Gomorrah.

For a few seconds, they both stood there and gawked at one another. Neither of them knew what to say.

“…Bam?” she eventually called out, and although she appeared to be quite shocked, she approached him with open arms. He hugged her tightly. Seeing her again was like being reunited with a sister he had not seen in half a lifetime, and he soon felt the wetness of her tears against his shirt. She was sobbing.

“Hey,” he chuckled once the hug had ended. “I know I’m a ghost, but don’t cry, okay?”

She nodded and wiped away tears with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry, Bam,” she apologized, and then she gave a tentative laugh. “You’re not the bearer of bad news, are you?”

His eyes widened a little at the question. He mentally slapped himself across the face for having been so thoughtless, because of course she thought someone else had died. They had not seen each other since the funeral, which was insane. Angie and Ryan had been together for years, and had he lived a year longer, they would have celebrated their ten-year anniversary. He felt guilty for having neglected her.

“No-no. Everyone’s fine.”

“Good,” she said and let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, Bam. I haven’t seen you since…” She found herself unable to finish the sentence and looked down at her stomach instead. Her cheeks reddened.

“I know,” the skater said and noticed a tall, muscular guy standing on the porch. He glared at Bam as though he held him accountable for a heinous crime. It made him frown. “I see you’ve…well, you’ve started a new life?”

“Oh, yeah, quite literally so,” she laughed and caressed her stomach. “Only two months left to wait and we’ll get to meet our little Rhiannon.”

“It’s a girl?” he asked and smiled a pained smile. He remembered all those times Ryan had mentioned kids, and he had always mentioned them as if it had not that big of a deal, but of course it had been. Ryan would have been a great father. As Bam threw a quick and suspicious glance at the
muscle-bound husband on the porch, Angie let out a small laugh and bumped her fist against his upper arm.

“Congratulations,” he was quick to add. “I just…” He offered her an apologetic smile. “This is kinda weird for me, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she said dismissively and lifted her shoulders in a half shrug. She then gestured him toward the garden furniture on the small deck on the left side of the house. “Take a seat, Bam. I’ve got some freshly made lemonade…”

Bam sank into the comfortable armchair and watched the beautiful garden with mild interest. He remembered that Angie had always been tinkering with her flower and vegetable gardens, or rushing off in her old red Mercedes for workout sessions and going to the beach. Ryan had accompanied her without sulking. Bam knew he had never been interested in any of those things, but he had learned to enjoy them, or perhaps he had feigned an interest to make her happy. Either way, he had been blessed, and Angie had been head over heels.

“There you go.” She poured him a glass of lemonade and sat down on the opposite side of the table from him.

“Thanks, Angie.”

“So, Bam…” She smiled nervously, obviously feeling caught off guard. “Why are you here?”

“I, um…”

Angie’s eyes widened. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean… I meant, why didn’t you come sooner?”

“To be honest…” he started saying, hesitant to speak freely about his feelings regarding her and Ryan. “I haven’t been doing so great. I feel totally stupid saying that to you, but yeah, things just haven’t been good.”

“I can relate,” she whispered. “My life was turned upside down. Six years…” She shook her head. “I can’t believe it’s been six years. I still wake up sometimes and…”

Bam bit his lower lip. “You don’t remember that he’s gone. I know the feeling.”

Angie nodded and dried fresh tears from her cheeks. The look on her face was, by now, nearly wistful, the smile almost bittersweet. The thirty-seven-year-old man knew that his presence conjured up memories of Ryan; seeing her again had the same effect on him.

“I visited the grave a couple of weeks ago,” he said in a quiet voice and watched her intently as countless emotions flickered over her face. “For some reason, I brought flowers and a beer. Poured the beer over the roses before I left.” He absent-mindedly scratched the back of his head. “Felt like it was the right thing to do.”

“Sounds like something you would do,” she laughed and drank some of the lemonade. “He would have appreciated it, Bam. I still go there every now and then… it’s difficult though. I have been telling him about my life – about Daniel and the baby. At first…” she paused and drew in a long and shaky breath. “I felt so guilty. I felt like I couldn’t possibly move on, like everyone kept saying. I mean, moving on, it’s silly, isn’t it? I can’t bury the past – I live the past. But even so…” she glanced down at her right hand and the golden ring that sparkled in the sunlight. “I have found love again. And for the first time since… since the car crash… I feel hopeful.” She bit her lower lip. “I feel like I have a future again.”
As Angie told him her story, Bam appeared overwrought, sad and unsure of how to respond to her honesty. On top of it all, he felt somewhat envious of her and her ability to move on with her life. Bam had tried. He had tried to fall in love with life again, but the consequences were always dire. He had nothing but sorrow to show for it.

“I’m happy for you,” he finally said, and Angie saw through him like one sees through the water in the drain.

“It’s okay to be angry, Bam,” she reassured him and touched his forearm, hoping to console him to some extent.

“I’m not angry, I’m just sick of it all,” he muttered and then heaved a sigh. He was annoyed with himself for being weak and for wallowing in self-pity. The woman next to him had lost her boyfriend of nine years and still managed to make the best of life. “Sorry. My marriage just fell apart, and… well, I’ve been thinking about Ryan a lot. He tried to guide me onto the right path before – before he passed away.”

The younger woman frowned. “What do you mean?”

“… I’m sure he told you all about it back in the day,” the skater said and then gave an insecure laugh, as though he could not decide whether to talk to her about it or not. He had never been close friends with Angie, but she had been close to Ryan, and in some way she was all that was left of him.

“Look,” he started and willed a smile to his lips. “He… there was a photo of Willa, a really old one, that he kept safe for me for years and years…” He paused and gazed down at the glass of lemonade. A slight crease appeared between his eyebrows. “He gave it to me a week before he died-”

“Oh!” she gasped and then covered her mouth with her hand, slightly embarrassed about her less than discrete reaction. “I remember… he showed it to me. He did, Bam,” she whispered and took a hold of his hand. “He hoped… oh, I don’t know if I should say this…” She wrinkled her forehead and looked at him with sadness brimming in her eyes. “He told me he hoped that you would reach out to Ville again, to make amends and restore your friendship. That’s why he gave you the photo… I-I’m so sorry, Bam. I should have told you sooner.”

Bam looked as though he had been hit in the head by a meteorite. He drew his lower lip between his teeth, and his eyes were pensive, almost thoughtful, and directly aimed at the brunette.

“… Thanks, Angie,” he whispered solemnly and closed his eyes for a couple of seconds. He attempted to pull himself together, though it was easier said than done. “I, uh… I need to get going. I’m really sorry, I just…”

“Yes, of course,” she said and bit her lip.

“I’m sorry,” Bam said again. Angie just smiled stiffly in return, and they both rose from the table and walked toward the driveway. They stood awkwardly next to one another for a few seconds, and then she put her hand on his cheek, forcing him to look her in the eyes. Bam felt confused.

“Hey, Bam,” Angie said quietly. “I get it, you know. In fact, I think I get it better than anyone.”

The skater nodded. “Yeah. I hope I didn’t ruin your day completely,” he said, and her hand fell back to her side.

“… I know it’s odd, but…” she whispered and looked somewhat ashamed. “Please, come visit me more often. I feel like reminiscing about him. Seeing you again, well, it makes me think. It makes me
look back.” She took a glance back at the house, though no one was there. The husband had gone back inside. “I don’t know if it’s allowed… I just need someone to remind me…” She shook her head. “I’m a silly girl, aren’t I?”

Bam smiled. “Then I’m a silly guy,” he said, and then he let out a laugh. “Well, I am, actually. But, um… Angie, you’re not. We’ll always miss him, even when we’re ninety-nine years old and wearing diapers.”

“I know,” she whispered and let out a strangled sob. “I-I always thought we’d stay together until the end. You, me, Ryan…” She dried away tears and snot with the arm of her dress without feeling the least bit embarrassed.

“Yeah?” Bam asked. He was doing his best not to shed another tear, but seeing her crying her eyes out tugged at his heartstrings.

“… I thought we’d spend our last good years in Castle Bam…” She smiled at her own silly idea, though the pain quickly outmaneuvered her. “We’d walk around with our grandchildren at our heels. You’d teach them how to skateboard… Ryan would run after them with pizza and kneepads.” She laughed, though it sounded more pained than amused. Bam wrapped his arms around her and squeezed, hugging her and comforting her as he should have done after the car crash. He had been too tangled in his own misery to see how she had struggled.

“I’ve missed you, Bam,” she croaked. “… Don’t wait so long before you come to see me again.”

“Yeah, you too,” he whispered and let go of her. “I’ll stop by more often. You and your… uh, Daniel, are welcome whenever.”

She nodded in silent agreement. “And Rhiannon,” she added, and something clicked inside Bam’s head. His eyes widened, and the ice in his heart melted.

“And Rhiannon,” he said and waved her goodbye. As he looked back one final time, he saw a hopeful look on Angie’s face, and it sparked something inside of him. But then, as soon as she and her perfect life was out of sight, Bam felt himself crumble into bits and pieces.

19:39 p.m.

The moment Bam stepped back inside the car again, he buried his face in his hands and cried. The photo had indeed been Ryan’s last gift, his last piece of advice, to Bam. With this in mind, he pulled out his iPhone and finished writing the text message to Linde within a few minutes. As he pressed send, Bam lowered his shoulders and felt some of the tension leaving his body.

“… Fuck,” he whispered to himself and let out a deep breath, relieved and somewhat befuddled.

When his cellphone rang, he jumped and looked at it, wondering who it could be. As he read the caller’s name, he stared in wide-eyed wonder at the screen, completely blindsided. His mind went blank.

“… Hello?” he asked when he had mustered up the courage to answer.

“Bam, is that you?” the caller asked, and the heavy accent was unmistakably Finnish.

“Hey, Linde. Yeah, it’s me.” he said and scratched his chin. “It’s Bam.”
Linde paused for thought before letting out a contagious laugh. Bam chuckled too, though he felt his heart racing and his body trembling from an internal cold. It was as though the air itself was aquiver.

“It’s been what, ten years?”

“Yeah,” Bam said and felt the first sharp pangs of separation at the familiar voice that spoke so softly. In spite of all that was written in the past, his voice held no contempt or blame. Bam was thankful for the magnanimity, for it was more than he deserved. “I’m sorry. I know I just messaged you out of nowhere, but I came across a HIM poster a couple of months ago-”

“You want to come see us,” Linde finished for him. Bam knew he was grinning widely, happy to hear from the American again and eager to arrange a meeting. “You’re always welcome, Bam. I think I speak for all the guys when I say so.”

“… Even Willa?” Bam asked and then bit his lower lip, worried that he had overstepped. “Sorry for asking,” he quickly added, and he heard the Finn drawing in a sharp breath; he was unsure of how to answer. Bam understood why – a decade had gone by without a word between them – and yet he needed a response. He needed to know how badly he had ruined things.

“He’s… I don’t know, Bam,” Linde confessed quietly. From where he was standing, a decade had gone by and old wounds were just that – old. “He hasn’t talked about you – not since the car crash. Back then… he was worried. We were all worried.”

Bam nodded to himself, and then he remembered that he was on the phone. “Of course,” he said. “I think he’ll be alright with it though,” the guitarist eventually said. He was still trying to wrap his head around the fact that Bam had reached out to them again. “He might feel a little overwhelmed, but I think that’s fairly normal after such a long time. But who knows? He isn’t the same man he was back then.”

“… No?”

“He grew up,” Linde said and then he laughed. “Or rather, he outgrew the rockstar lifestyle and moved into a little cottage outside Tampere. He’s painting and writing Finnish songs, and he’s become more interested in folk music and whatnot. A real hippie,” he commented, amused by his friend’s transition. “Or perhaps just a folk singer. You know the type.”

Bam frowned at the information, not fully able to imagine Ville as a Finnish version of Bob Dylan, but perhaps something to the likes of Johnny Cash. He had the voice to pull it off but not the character.

“That’s… hard to picture,” the skater commented. In his eyes, Ville had always been androgynous and wild, a proper child of the 70s, and he found it difficult to see him in a different role. However, he did realize that even Ville – the 90s poster boy for dark and sensual music – had to grow up. Bam kept reminding himself that he was not a youngster anymore, and he knew that Ville must have encountered the same idea.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Linde said and laughed. “He’s very melancholic.”

Bam could not help but to smile at what the blond had pointed out. “Still,” he said in a humored tone of voice. “Can’t really picture him with a harmonica and not a fag dangling from between his lips.” They both cracked up with laughter. Bam wondered if he still smoked twenty a day, but he did not ask. It was none of his business.

“He’s happier like this,” the Finn said once the laughter had died down. “Can’t keep on doing the
same thing until we die of old age. I mean, singing songs we wrote when we were twenty years old feels… I don’t know, it feels childish somehow.”

“I guess I can understand that.”

“Anyway,” Linde said and then paused briefly as someone spoke to him in Finnish. “Sorry about that. Uh, yeah, you should come see us in London in December – on the seventeenth, I think.”

“Alright, that sounds cool,” the dark-haired man agreed. “And Linde, before you hang up – don’t tell Ville that I’ll be there.”

The guitarist went silent for a moment. “Alright,” he agreed – no questions asked – and then he hung up on him.

As Bam sat alone in the car with his iPhone still pressed against his ear, he could not be sure whether he felt relieved or disappointed. For all that the Finn had been talkative, he had also seemed somewhat suspicious. He had every right to be. History had a way of repeating itself. Perhaps he did not want Bam to become infatuated with Ville again, or maybe it was the other way around, but Bam knew that there would be no romantic renaissance between them. They were older and hopefully wiser than they had been ten years ago.

Ryan would have been pleased though. Bam took a moment to simply remember Ryan and all of his warmth and kindness, and realization suddenly hit him hard. Even in death, Ryan managed to aid him when no one else could. The thought made him dizzy, and he wished that Ryan could be there next to him. Missing Ryan was like having someone use an ice scoop to dig out his heart.

“… I did it,” he declared to the air. “I fucking did it.”

Bam finally drove away from Angie’s house – away from her new life. He still had to get back home and deal with the remnants of his old self.

07:04 a.m.  20.06.2011

“Hey, Bam, you’ve got to wake up, man,” Raab said and gently shook Bam’s shoulder. The skater, who had been dreaming about sandy beaches and ladies in polka dot bikinis, came awake with a jolt. As he blinked and looked around the hotel room, he let out a dissatisfied groan, and before Raab could say another word, Bam rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. They had been drinking quite heavily that night, and Bam had a throbbing headache and felt sick to his stomach. He needed another hour of shut-eye before he could drag himself out of bed.

“Bam…” the blond man said and slapped him over the head. “Wake up.” He poked his arm. “Dude, you seriously need to get out of-

“Dude!” Bam snapped and swatted away Raab’s hand. “It’s too early, for fuck’s sake.”

The other man said nothing for a few seconds, and Bam nearly drifted back to sleep. But as soon as he was fading back into blissful oblivion, he felt a hand tugging at his tee-shirt. Bam let out a low grunt, and in spite of his growing annoyance, he decided to ignore his friend. Raab could be a proper pain in the ass.

“Come on, Bam. It’s really serious this time…” Raab pleaded, still urging his friend to wake up. The fact that he was crying was completely lost on the dark-haired man.
“… Jeez, man,” Bam grumbled and sat up straight. He was bleary-eyed, grumpy, and still half asleep. “What the hell is going on?”

The moment the question fell from his lips, he took notice of the tear-stained face and the twitching lower lip of his childhood friend. Raab broke down completely and started sobbing. Bam felt his heart drop to the pit of his stomach, and his face screwed up into a perplexed expression. He could not for the life of him understand what was going on, or why Raab was crying, but he had a strong gut feeling that something bad had happened.

“H-here,” the blond whimpered and handed Bam his iPhone. The skater hesitated for a moment, but grabbed the phone and gazed down at the screen. He felt himself go pale as he noticed who the caller was – Jess – because he never would have called unless something serious had happened back home in Philadelphia. His immediate thought was his father, being both overweight and middle-aged. His tongue suddenly felt thick, and he struggled to speak. He eventually managed to squeeze out a quiet: “It’s Bam?”

He heard his brother weeping, and he had to muster up courage before speaking to his little brother. Bam heard him as he drew in a shaky breath. “Fuck, Bam,” he said, and his voice bled with concern and grief. “I… you’ve got to come back home. There’s… there’s been an accident-”

“It’s Phil, isn’t it?”

“What? N-no, it’s…” His brother went quiet for a moment, and Bam could hear April saying something in the background. “Sorry,” Jess mumbled and choked back a sob. “Look, Bam… it’s… it’s Dunn.”

Bam was suddenly white as chalk. “He’s… he’s in the hospital or what?”

A moment of unbearable silence followed. “No, Bam… he’s… he’s gone. He’s gone.”

Bam’s mouth kept opening and closing like a goldfish, but no sound came out. His eyes were wide open, and he began trembling like a leaf in the wind. Raab’s hand was on his shoulder, though he did not feel the touch. He only felt the explosions in his heart – pangs of pain and disbelief – and then he heard an anguished sob. It had fallen from his own lips.

“… A car crash,” he heard his brother say. “Another guy was in the car, but the police haven’t told us who yet…”

“… I-I…” Bam stuttered and closed his eyes. His brain desperately tried to make sense of it all, but nothing seemed sensible anymore. It was farfetched and absurd, and he could not help but to think that the police must have gotten it wrong. But even so, he heard himself saying: “I’m… I’m coming home”, though he had no idea where the words had even come from; his mouth had simply formed the words.

Jess eventually hung up, too brokenhearted to listen to his baby brother crying. Bam sat on the bed with tears streaming down his face, and for every sob that slipped through his lips, he felt as though a small piece of reality was being shattered. However, he was not sure that he could believe in it. He had seen Ryan a week ago, and nothing had been amiss. How could he simply crash his car on the highway? Bam desperately wanted to believe that he had been fooled – that his friends had come up with an exceptionally bad joke – and that Ryan would be fine. The little voice in the back his mind argued that his mother and brother never would have been part of such a scheme.

“Bam?” the other man said. “Are you…” He stopped himself as he realized what a stupid question he had been about to ask. “I’ve ordered airline tickets,” he said instead.
“… Oh,” the skater whispered. “Right.”

“We’ve… we’re going home in an hour, Bam,” Raab informed him. He dried the wetness from his own cheeks with the back of his hand. “You… you need to get ready. Like, right now.”

Bam nodded. The sickness in his stomach was unlike anything he had ever felt before, almost like a nest of coiling snakes, and he felt them creeping up his gullet. He got up from the bed and stumbled into the bathroom, and there he hunched over the toilet bowl. His stomach rolled, and he vomited. He vomited again and again, and in the end, he was merely retching. There were no snakes left, though he felt the poison. The pain was unlike any other, and he marveled at how he had not collapsed into a pile of limbs on the bathroom floor.

As he finished, he stood with his back pressed against the door and shook his head. Tears and snot continued to flow down his cheeks and mouth, and for a couple of seconds, all he could do was stare at himself in the bathroom mirror. He wanted to punch his own reflection, though he did not entirely know why. All he knew was that the pain was overwhelming in its intensity, and all he wanted was for it to go away. All he wanted was Ryan.
The Great Pretender

Chapter Notes

Just one more chapter after this. Thank you so much for the encouraging words <3 They mean a lot.

16:12 p.m.  29.06.2011

It was the day after the funeral. Bam had locked the doors to Castle Bam, trying his best to shield himself from the hungry news reporters who waited outside his property. He had nothing more to say to them. Two days after Ryan had died, the footage of him crying his eyes out by the crash site had been televised. He had been forthcoming, even in his hour of need, and he had done an interview. In spite of his compliance, the cameramen had filmed him with snot pouring from his nostrils and tears running down his face. It would sell, and at the notion of a few quick bucks, all kindness went down the drain. Bam frowned at the thought. Even if he never left the house, they would not stop chasing after him until the novelty of Ryan’s death wore off, and even then, his friends and family would continue pestering him.

The previous day had been a nightmare. If he had to hear one more word about Ryan’s ‘untimely death’, he would go bonkers. At the wake, he had received his fair shares of unwanted hugs and stiff condolences. People he had not talked to in years were suddenly texting him, asking him how he was holding up, or asking him if he needed someone to talk to. It was bizarre.

In the end, he had ushered everyone out of his house and locked the doors. None of them understood how he felt; how he did not want to talk to anyone who was still alive. As soon as he had seen the footage of himself sobbing at the crash site – with Missy’s hand on his shoulder, her wedding ring sparkling – he had asked for a divorce. She had stormed off, angry and hurt. Bam, on the other hand, had felt nothing but relief.

Nine days had gone by since Ryan had veered off the road and into a tree. Bam sat in the living room with a bottle of beer and watched trash TV, hoping it would distract him for an hour or two, but it was futile. His mind began to wander. He thought about Ryan and their last conversation – the one about him and his women. It was what had made him tell Missy, ‘We’re done – you’re moving out. Today’. Missy had, in turn, thrown a vase at him, but after years of crazy stunts, what did getting hit by a vase square in the face hurt? Knowing that he had married her out of convenience was more hurtful than any kind of physical pain. Ryan had of course been right about his marriage. It made him feel dizzy, and the dizziness had nothing to do with the alcohol he had poured down his throat.

“I know you’ve been avoiding him, Bam, and I think that’s why your marriage stinks. You never wanted to be with her in the first place, as was the case with Jenn and all those chicks.”

Those words were playing on repeat inside his head. Ryan’s dying wish and it had been about the Finnish son of a bitch. Great, just great.

“… For fuck’s sake…” he muttered to himself and reached for his wallet. He cringed as he saw that it was emblazoned with the HIM logo, the same logo he had tattooed on his lower abdomen – and on the side of his stomach. Upon opening it, he was greeted by a familiar pair of green eyes, teasing and taunting him, and those pouty lips, softer than velvet, and yet the words they had shaped had been
nothing but lies. His face twisted with anger, his eyes dark and full of hatred.

Ville had not said a word about the ‘untimely death’; he had not sent flowers. He had done nothing.

The skater got up from the armchair and walked over to the fireplace. The timber overmantel was furnished with family photos, cheap figurines April had given him and a purple plastic flower. He slid down to sit on the floor and fumbled for the matches. Once a fire had been produced, he leaned back and watched the flames as they licked hungrily at the firewood, reducing it to ashes.

Bam reached for the glossy picture again and glared at his ex-boyfriend. Ryan, who had shared every ounce of his being with all his friends, had considered the singer a brother in all but the flesh. He had defended him throughout the breakup and up until his death, having been loyal to a fault. In the end, it had meant nothing. Ville was probably too preoccupied banging twenty-year-old models in his luxuriously furnished Helsinki flat to even notice that Ryan had died. Bam pictured him squeezing a small, firm breast while, in the background, the news channel showed the footage of him sobbing at the crash site. Perhaps he whispered, ‘I love you,’ into her ear as he entered her, happy to be far away from Bam and his misery.

“Fuck you,” he said and attempted to throw the glossy picture into the fire, but it sailed through the air and landed on the side of the hearth rather than in the flames. Bam immediately regretted what he had done, recalling Ryan’s words once more, and he picked it up again and burned his fingers in the process. He did not care. As he studied the picture, he noticed a slightly blackened corner, but Ville’s face had remained untouched by the flames.

“… Fuck me,” he then whispered and put the picture back where it belonged in his wallet. He could quite vividly imagine Ryan standing next to him, rolling his eyes at the hopeless attempt at a symbolic act, and he let out a small laugh while wiping away tears. Ryan would have called him a moron. It was an accurate description, too.

06:54 a.m.         17.12.2017

Bam was on the plane to England. He watched the sky with mild interest, though he cherished the peace and quiet of the cloudless, blue sky, aware that London would be a messy affair. It always was. A couple of years ago, he would have been thrilled about the bars and nightclubs – about the fans who wanted to take selfies with him and buy him drinks – but that man was dead and buried. The thought made him want to shake his head. He remembered the hotel room in Cuenca and the glass of wine had consumed, and for what? After he had tossed out the sobriety chips – the chips he had counted obsessively every day for several months – he had understood something crucial about himself. It was unnecessary to go back to rehab for another three months; it was, however, necessary to move on with his life. Instead of getting drunk, he had decided to start anew. He could not do that with all the loose ends though. They had to be tied.

Again, he gazed out the small, round window and was reminded of how fragile his existence was, and how fragile he himself was. What if he had reached the wrong conclusion? If Ville sneered at him and told him to get lost, how would he cope? The distance between them was not merely physical at this point, after all, and the decade that separated ‘now’ and ‘then’ seemed like a mountain that had to be climbed. Could he do that?

“You’ve got this. You’re Bam Margera. You can do whatever the fuck you want, remember?”

He smiled, seeing Ryan’s happy face before his mind’s eye. Back in 2001, he had been in a somewhat similar position – his nerves had gotten to him – and Ryan had given him a pep talk. Had
Ryan not been there, Bam never would have walked through that crimson door with a cheeky smile on his face, and he never would have befriended Ville.

Ville. The American frowned, once again reminded of where he was going, and he was reminded of why he was going there. Inside his head, he could picture Ville walking about in London, watching and listening to the strange world around him, taking in every new impression. A cigarette was pressed between his lips, and his hair was somewhat longer than last time. It curled beautifully and framed his face. Eyes with a fiery flame of green and silver threads in them peered at life with newfound curiosity; lips that were impossibly soft and warm curved into a smile.

“… Mr. Margera?” the flight attendant asked and regarded him with a bewildered look on her face.

“Oh, yeah,” he muttered, a little annoyed that she had interfered. “What’s up?”

“Would you like something to eat or drink?”

“Uh, no,” he said and offered her a tight-lipped smile. “I’m good.”

“I’m sorry to have interrupted you, Mr. Margera,” she said, and her tone of voice had taken on a sharp, firm edge. “And please, let me know if you’d like some refreshments.” She smiled politely and then left him to his own devices. Bam suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. While he realized that the flight attendant was bored and impatient, he simply could not get himself to chitchat with her. Her disappointment had been obvious, but if Bam were to have dull conversations with every person who recognized him from MTV, he would be wasting a large amount of his time and energy. He did not mind the fans, however, a lot of people felt as though he owed them something for simply being a public figure. For a brief moment, he wondered how Ville coped with being one of the most famous people in Finland. He then remembered that Finland numbered some 5.5 million people, whereas the US had a population of 325 million people.

Bam looked down at his wristwatch – 07:19 a.m. – and sighed. He then yawned into his hand and once again gazed out of the window. His eyes were heavy with tiredness, though he could not sleep, still deeply immersed in his thoughts. Nervous butterflies fluttered in his stomach every time he thought about Ville – about his physical perfection, and about his quirks and mannerisms – and he felt his mouth go dry. While the outcome of their reunion could possibly turn out to be disastrous, he would get the closure he needed. He could move on from living in the past and wallowing in self-inflicted pain. Perhaps Ville would feel the same way.

“Mr. Margera?” the flight attendant said, once again breaking his chain of thought. “You need to put your seatbelt back on. We’re landing in approximately fifteen minutes.”

19:58 p.m.

He stood in the concert hall and waited for the music to soothe his frayed nerves. An alcohol-free beer rested in his right hand and his iPhone in the other. He had been texting back and forth with some of his friends’ back home, though no one knew where he was or what he was about to do. Before he had left the US, he had lied about going back to Spain for a week or two. Had he told April, she would have fretted about his well-being – and the likelihood of another relapse. Jess would have directed some unfriendly remarks at him regarding his sexuality, and Raab and Novak would have exchanged concerned looks, worried that he had started shooting up instead of drinking. In the end, the lie offered him more peace of mind than the truth, and he was not hurting anyone else. If he ended up hurting himself, so be it.
The concert hall was starting to get crowded. People of all ages surrounded him, laughing and talking as though all was fine and dandy. Bam did not share their enthusiasm. His stomach was dancing in nervousness, his nerves tense and wrought, and without alcohol in his system, he would feel that way for the rest of the night. For a brief moment, he contemplated buying a pack of cigarettes, but when he remembered how he had berated Ville for sucking on cancer sticks, he banished the thought.

A young girl suddenly bumped into him, causing him to spill beer on his jacket. She turned around and apologized, and he saw the recognition in her eyes as they widened. A knowing smile touched her lips, and she nodded as a polite way of saying ‘I see you, Mr. Margera’ and then walked over to her two friends. A couple of seconds later, they were all exchanging giddy looks and stole furtive glances at him. Bam felt ill at ease. If they were fans of both him and of the band, they most likely knew about the falling out. The sighting would spark numerous rumors regarding a possible reconciliation.

His iPhone beeped, demanding his attention. Linde had written him a text that said: “Good evening, Bam. Hope you had a nice flight. Come backstage when the show is over. Btw, I didn’t tell Ville.”

Bam exhaled deeply. He felt the butterflies fluttering in his stomach, a feeling he had hoped would disappear with age, but as he stood there and waited, his palms sweaty and his heart pounding, he realized it had only gotten worse. Would Linde care if he legged it back to the hotel? As the crowd started chanting, “HIM, HIM, HIM…” the idea of leaving became all the more enticing. Had Ryan been there, he would have raised an eyebrow and called him out on his bullshit. But seeing as Ryan could not be there in the flesh, Bam had to do the job in his place, and he mentally slapped himself. It was now or never, and if his nerves got in the way, he would spend the rest of his life wondering. That was not an option.

The speakers crackled. A voice announced that the concert was about to start. Bam looked around and saw that the concert hall was brimming over with eager fans, some young and some middle-aged. They were screaming and jumping up and down with excitement, reminding him of concerts of his youth, and the very air was shivering with anticipation. Bam closed his eyes, recalling crystal clear memories from his first HIM gig. Ville had been young and flamboyant back then. He had worn leather pants, a revealing crop top and a beanie, which had been his signature look at the time. Bam smiled as he remembered the thick layer of eyeliner, and of course, the black nail polish.

Music started to flood from the speakers. Bam opened his eyes and lifted his face to the stage, but the lights were too bright to see anything but the vague outlines of thin bodies moving about. As the music started to take shape, the lights dimmed like dying stars and everything was bathed in shades of blue and red. The sound of the keyboard floated through the air like fuzzy dandelion seeds. A warm wave of nostalgia swept over him as he stood there, alone in a sea of people, and he felt tears burning in his eyes. It was the song of his youth – ‘Join Me in Death’ – the one that immediately brought him back to the hotel room in Helsinki. Ryan had been there, frowning and laughing at the TV, and Bam had been too mesmerized to care.

Ville entered the stage. For a second, the noise of the concert hall faded into oblivion. All Bam could hear was a constant thudding, almost like a heartbeat in his eardrum, and the butterflies tickled his insides with wings made from pieces of broken glass. Ville, the man he had banished from his house ten years ago, stood on the other side of the room. In spite of advancing years and countless cigarettes, he had not yet withered. He was the same statuesque man Bam remembered, and although he could not see his face clearly from where he stood, he was not blind. Ville was still mesmerizing, and his voice, husky and deep, still made him weak in the knees.
The band had ploughed through the set list in what felt like the blink of an eye. Ville, now drenched in sweat, mumbled, “Thank you, thank you,” into the microphone while walking back and forth on the stage. “You have been wonderful, London – thank you, and good night!” he yelled and waved his arms energetically at the audience. When the band members had all exited the stage, the crowd started chanting, “Again!” over and over, and Bam joined them. After a few minutes of shouting, the five men reappeared for the inevitable encore.

Ville picked up the microphone and said, “I am overwhelmed by your enthusiasm, truly,” and let out an amused chuckle. As the audience cheered and whistled at the praise, he pressed a cigarette between his lips and started puffing on it. “Don’t worry, darlings – if I haven’t had an asthma attack yet, I promise it won’t happen tonight…” Again, he laughed softly. Bam saw through the act though; he saw that Ville was trying to appear nonchalant, but the reality was quite different. Ville had perhaps created HIM, but HIM had certainly created him. Now it was dying, taking only shallow breaths, waiting to be engulfed by darkness.

The last song came on. Bam started elbowing his way toward the backstage area, and as he located the right door, Ville started singing. He froze for a second and threw a quick glance over his shoulder, catching one last glimpse of HIM – of Ville with his hands clapping the microphone. The song made his skin break out in gooseflesh. It was a song he knew all too well, and his heart wept at the notion of ‘turning three sevens into three sixes again’. In 2009, when he had finally forced himself to sit through ‘Screamworks: Love in Theory and Practice’, he had cried shamelessly.

“Where do you think you’re going?” someone asked abruptly. As he spun around, he took notice of an older, heftier man with a full sleeve tattoo and an unkempt beard. “You’re not allowed back here.”

“Calm down, dude,” Bam said and regarded the man, who was obviously the bodyguard, with wary eyes. “I’m on the guest list – Bam Margera.”

The man frowned and checked something on his phone. “Oh, pardon me,” he said after some time, offering the American an apologetic smile. “Yes, you’re welcome, sir. The guys are wrapping things up as we speak,” he added and opened the door to the backstage area. Bam’s first instinct was to grab a beer from the fridge; his nerves begged for it, but he held himself in check and plopped down on the couch with a bottle of water instead.

The music came to a halt. He heard Ville say goodbye to the crowd, wishing them a merry Christmas and a ‘glamorous’ new year, which made him smile. The audience cheered, once again chanting for more, but Bam knew there would be no more songs. Once the stage lights died down and the five men were nowhere to be seen, he imagined that realization would suddenly dawn on their faces: This was a final farewell. Regardless of how the crowd reacted, Bam felt as though someone had poured a bucket of ice water over his head.

“…Bam,” he heard Linde say – his accent thick like rich gravy – and Bam immediately rose from the couch and walked over to the blond man with open arms. The hug was brief and awkward, and as they took in the familiar and yet unfamiliar sight of each other’s faces, they laughed nervously. Seeing the changes – the lines and wrinkles – was eye-opening. Gone were the boys.

“This is so strange,” Linde said and smiled sadly. “You look different.”

“Oh yeah? That’s what ten years tend to do to a person-”

“Bam!!”
The American felt strong arms embrace him from behind, nearly lifting him off his feet, and he yelped and then laughed. “Mige!” he yelled and spun around to face the bassist. The smile on his face was huge.

“Mitä vittua?” Burton said and stared at the skater in wide-eyed surprise. “Holy shit. It’s been what, ten years?”

“Ten fucking years,” Bam confirmed and put his arm around the keyboardist.

The reunion between friends of old was an emotional affair. As they caught up with one another and talked about the big things and the small things that had defined their lives in the aftermath of the breakup in 2007, Bam was overly aware of the fact that one face was missing from the group. His heart sunk, but he could not bring himself to ask about Ville. He was afraid that the others would believe he had come back with only the singer in mind, and that was not the case, at least not entirely.

They chitchatted for a while. Bam got lost in thought for half a moment as he wondered where the singer had gone. It was maddening. He then felt someone touch his forearm – Linde – and he realized that he had been abnormally quiet for some time. His cheeks reddened, and as he focused on the conversation again, he felt overly aware of himself. He was the odd one out.

“… And the baby looked like a fucking gremlin, but I couldn’t tell my wife that!”

“Don’t all babies look like that?”

“They don’t just look it,” Mige huffed. “They are.”

Bam threw back his head and laughed, loud and hearty and just slightly forced, and the guys joined in.

“That’s horrible,” Linde scolded him lightly, though he continued to laugh at the story, perhaps grateful that he had chosen not to reproduce. “Really, really horrible.”

A hand suddenly landed on Bam’s shoulder, squeezing it lightly. Bam felt his mouth go dry, almost like someone had filled it with cotton, and he immediately knew whose touch it was.

“… Bam?” the familiar deep voice that had haunted him for years whispered, causing him to shudder. He swallowed thickly and forced his body to turn around. The moment their eyes locked, he felt as though someone had punched him in the gut. After ten years, it felt surreal to be gazing into those green orbs again.

“… Willa,” he said after some time, his voice breathless.

“Willa,” the Finn repeated slowly, rolling the word around his mouth. “I’ve missed that.”

“Oh, yeah, I…” Opening his mouth, he started to speak, but words escaped him.

“Ten years now,” Ville said, his voice low and somewhat detached. “Ten years, Bam.”

The other four men nearly tripped over one another as they made it for the door, worried that they might ruin the magic of the moment, should such magic return. All of them knew that there was some unfinished business between the two, and while Bam’s text message had come out of the blue, they had welcomed him with open arms. In the band’s heyday, back in the early 2000s, Bam had been an invaluable friend and supporter, and while the breakup had been messy, it was still a private matter between him and Ville.
“We’ll be at the hotel,” Linde informed them, sounding vaguely insecure. Before he could close the door, Ville said something to him in Finnish, and while Ville was not an intimidating man by any means, the look on his face was murderous. Linde gave him a tight smile and said, “Had I told you, you would have avoided him,” in English. “I know you, Ville.”

Ville continued to glare daggers at him, though he said nothing. With Bam in the room, little could be added to the conversation. The damage had already been done, after all.

“I will talk to you tomorrow,” the blond man said, offering Bam an apologetic smile. He then closed the door with a small thud, leaving the two men to their own devices. As they stared at one another, unable to say any of the words they had often thought of saying, the tension in the room grew thick.

“So,” Bam muttered and scratched the back of his head. “This isn’t awkward at all…”

“No,” the Finn agreed and looked away, feeling as though eye contact would reveal too much about his state of mind. He then did what any sane man in his position would have done and pulled out his pack of cigarettes, lighting another smoke. Upon exhaling, he mumbled, “Not awkward at all,” without taking his eyes off the floor, still utterly bewildered about his presence in the room. Seeing him again was surrealistic – something out of a TV-series, Twin Peaks, perhaps – and he wondered briefly whether or not he was hallucinating. It suddenly seemed absurdly reasonable to argue that someone at the hotel had drugged his afternoon tea.

“The concert was great,” the thirty-eight-year-old commented when the silence became too much. “Look, that wasn’t Linde’s fault – I told him not to say anything.”

Ville nodded weakly in response, still puffing on the cigarette. As he lifted his eyes and took in the sight of his ex-boyfriend, ten years older than last time they had met, he found that he did not recognize him. The man before him had a sturdy, muscular physique, and his hair, cut a little longer than a typical buzz cut, was specked with gray. What startled him the most, however, were the light wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. From the moment they had met, Ville had been charmed by Bam’s boyishness, but this matured edition lacked all promise of youthful allure.

“You look… older,” Ville said suddenly, and then his cheeks turned pink.

“No shit,” Bam said and laughed. And as he laughed, Ville was briefly reminded of the boy from seventeen years ago, the one who had been full of radiant smiles and wild antics. But be that as it may, he knew that the boy he had known back then was gone. The man in front of him was just that – a man.

“I’m sorry, I…” the singer apologized and walked over to the coffee table to put out his cigarette in an empty beer can. “To tell you the truth, Bam,” he began without taking his eyes off him, “I did not expect for you to be here.” He let out an unamused laugh and studied the aged face of the man who had told him no. “I thought I had seen the last of you – especially with how things ended between us.”

A strained silence followed. Ville walked over to the couch in the corner and sat down, the leather squeaking noisily under his weight.

“I know,” Bam said quietly, uncomfortable with being at the receiving end of Ville’s scrutinizing stare. He knew he had not aged well. The alcohol and the less than gracious lifestyle had all taken their toll on him. And where Bam was gray and wrinkly, Ville was dark and smooth. He was older than him by three years, but his face was only lightly etched with lines of age. They did not mar his perfect, ageless beauty though, they merely enhanced the chiseled features of his face, and the weight
he had lost made him appear younger, not older.

“Bam,” the Finn said in a deliberately cold, detached tone of voice. “Why are you here?”

The question was predictable, but it still made the American flinch. There was something about his voice that made him feel nervous.

“… I came here to get closure,” he admitted and sank into one of the two armchairs on the opposite side of the table from the Finn. As he sat there, he started nervously fiddling with his bracelet, wishing he had something to take the edge off. He felt the weight of his ex-lover’s stare, unforgiving and cold, and he felt naked. He felt as though Ville could see straight through him.

“Closure,” the older man repeated. “You need closure.” The expression on his face changed, and Bam saw the amused disbelief, and then indignation. “You, of all people” – he suppressed a laugh, his green eyes flashing with restrained anger – “need closure.”

“Willa,” the younger man said, his mouth fumbling for words. “I need to set things straight…” he began, but the Finn interrupted him by letting out a disbelieving snort. He could not believe the nerve of this man. How did one simply show up uninvited after ten years of nothing? And the parting gift had been a broken heart and a passive death wish that had made him relapse – that had made him drink a bottle of cheap Koskenkorva before walking into the woods, hoping to never again see the light of day. He had, of course, failed, and his reward had been a thunderous headache and frozen fingers. At least the hangover had cured him for his insatiable appetite. He had not had alcohol since.

“That is utter bullshit, Bam,” he said, his voice calm and yet intense. “Why not eight years ago?” he asked, pressing another cigarette between his lips. His anger had retreated, though his face was cold and devoid of emotion. “Why not five years ago?” He blew out the blue, gray smoke and felt instantly soothed by the nicotine. It had the magic ability to remove tension. “Why, Bam? I want to hear it, really, especially seeing as you’re here and I had no say in it.”

The American shook his head. “Isn’t it obvious, Willa?” he asked while eying the cigarette, wondering how many he had smoked that day. “I went to Spain and saw that fucking ‘Farewell Tour’ poster up on a wall, and it just hit me over the head like a sack of potatoes…”

“Had it only been a sack of potatoes, Bam,” the Finn said dryly. At that, the younger man had to laugh, and Ville could not contain his own amusement, letting the ghost of a smile touch his lips. He had such a soft spot in his heart for that laugh, musical and yet loud somehow, and it was always unrestrained. Hearing it again made him feel nostalgic about their time together. But what was nostalgia if not a wistful remembrance of the past, completely bereft of the pain that had caused them to leave it behind? Above all else, it was unrealistic, and it was absurd to dip into those memories again, ten years after they had been put to rest.

“So, Bam,” Ville mumbled without taking his eyes off him. The laughter had subsided and a sudden aura of seriousness had descended upon them. “Tell me…” Before continuing, he stubbed the second cigarette out in the makeshift ashtray and leaned back, his eyes dark with suppressed emotion. “Tell me, what exactly do you mean by ‘closure’?”

Bam looked at his feet, now propped on the table. He had to ask himself the same question before he could find the right words, but as he was quick to realize, there were no right words.

“… I knew I had to come here,” he said with a sigh, burying his face in his hands. “Willa, believe me, I know how insane me being here is-”

“It isn’t insane,” the Finn interrupted. “It’s simply idiotic.”
“Let me finish – please.”

Ville rolled his eyes, unable to mask his annoyance. “Fine,” he grumbled. “Say whatever it is you came here to say. Just be quick about it.”

Bam shook his head. Now that Ville sat in front of him and the ghost had become real, he felt defeated. A lifetime ago, it was Ville who had stood in front of Castle Bam, bearing roses and professing undying love, but Bam had been too hurt to give a rat’s ass. Nothing could have repaired the damage done back then, mostly because he was unable to understand what Ville had gone through. But now an ocean of time stood between the past and the present, and Bam had, in his foolish mind, started believing that time could heal. He now found that it had not, and the scars were as ugly and deep as ever before.

“… It’s been hell on earth, Willa,” Bam admitted when Ville said nothing. “Ryan died. I-I don’t even know what to fucking say about that, I just… I…” He drew in a deep, shuddering breath, remembering how the one consistent, reliable presence in his life had simply ceased to exist. The thought of never seeing Ryan again had been incomprehensible – too abstract to be real – and he blamed the fact that he had never seen the body; or, the pitiful pile of flesh that had been pulled out from the wreck. It had never been an option, but after six years of mourning his loss by drinking, he thought that had he gotten the chance to see what little remained of his friend, perhaps things would have worked out differently. It would, at the very least, have kept him from thinking that it was some kind of a morbid joke – that Ryan would walk through the door any day now – until he became too worn out to hope for miracles.

Looking up, he saw that Ville had closed his eyes, or rather, he was squeezing them shut.

“… He crashed his fucking car, and, well…” Bam’s voice trailed off as his vision blurred with tears. More than six years had passed, but the sadness was still razor sharp and cut him to the bone. “He died instantly,” he added quietly.

“Yeah,” Ville said, his eyes fluttering open. “So I heard.” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, and he whispered, “I’m sorry, Bam,” under his breath. “I truly am.”

The younger man paused for a second, sensing that Ville’s anger was ebbing away. “Me too, Willa.”

“We were on tour when I first heard about it. Took me a moment to realize what was going on – we were in Germany,” the singer said without looking up. As he dug into the past and saw the pictures of the wrecked car on the TV screen in his Berlin suite, a slight frown crossed his face. Up until then, he had suppressed those images, but now, sitting next to his past lover, it all came back to life with a vengeance. Bam – and Missy – had stood by the guard rail, and Bam had cried noisily, nearly unable to stand without Missy’s support. His voice had been dubbed in German; however, Linde had come knocking on the door not five minutes later, yelling that Ryan was dead. He still remembered the ringing in his ears as his legs had caved in under him, and he had feared that he was about to have a mental breakdown. To calm his nerves, he had reached for his pack of cigarettes, his lifeline, and Linde, who had been convinced that Ville was having an asthma attack, had pressed the inhaler to his lips while shouting, ‘You are insane, Valo!’

“I… I wish I had reached out to you back then, Bam,” he whispered, still seeing the burned-out car in his mind’s eye. He imagined Ryan’s body, charred and unsalvageable, and then he thought about the strange nothingness of death. Ryan, who had been gentle and kind, had been wiped off the surface of the Earth. There had been no final farewell; there had been nothing.

Inside his head, Ville liked to imagine that his departure had been a Viking funeral. When a body
was burned, the Valkyries could more easily bring the deceased to Valhalla, and there, in the presence of Odin, the warriors could eat and drink and slay one another, but always with the knowledge that there would be a tomorrow. Then they would again drink and eat and kill.

“I intended to… to call you.” Ville bit the inside of his cheek as he considered what to say. “From the moment I realized that Ryan… And I thought about flying over there to attend the funeral, but I…” His voice trailed off as he looked down at the table, his dark hair falling into his eyes. The American thought he looked pained, and it was a pain he was all too familiar with. When Ville looked up, daring to meet his gaze once again, he whispered, “I don’t know, Bam. I’m glad I didn’t.”

“Yeah, me too.” Bam willed a smile to his lips, hoping to reassure the Finn. “It wouldn’t have been good. I wasn’t really –” he drew in a sharp breath “– I wasn’t really sane back then.”

“… Are you implying you ever were?”

Upon hearing the gentle teasing, although delivered with the slightest hint of bitterness, the sorrow lifted from Bam’s face. “There’s good crazy and then there’s bad crazy, you know,” he said jokingly, a small smile grazing his lips. “Before all that shit went down, I was definitely the good kind of crazy. I think my career proves that.”

Ville hummed. “I remember you tried to impress me by playing drums with your head once.”

“Well, it must’ve worked,” Bam said, grinning widely. “Just admit it, you were pretty crazy about me, even that early on. Even when I killed brain cells by playing drums with my fucking head.”

“What was I now?” Ville muttered, his hand hovering over the pack of cigarettes again. There were only two left now. He supposed that, if he were to be smart about it, he should save them for later. Should the conversation take them even further down memory lane, until all they could see were ghosts and tombstones, they would come in handy.

“Oh, come on, dude. Don’t take yourself so seriously,” the younger man said with a laugh. “It’s been a million years! Besides, we were just stupid kids back then, stupid and high on ourselves and raging hormones.”

The Finn raised a brow. “Perhaps you were.”

“Willa,” Bam said, drying a tear from the crook of his eye. “You wore sixty-five layers of eyeliner, washed your hair once every two weeks, and you considered half a cinnamon bun a nutritious meal. I don’t know how you managed to be alive.”

“That’s not true,” the Finn protested. “I wore no more than sixty layers of eyeliner – and some black eyeshadow, too, come to think of it – and alright, half a cinnamon bun probably wasn’t too healthy, but!” He gesticulated wildly at the air, his green eyes gleaming. “I washed it down with some lovely coffee.” A small crease appeared between his brows, and his eyes narrowed as he thought of something. “Or was it absinthe? Hmm. Either way, it wasn’t just half a cinnamon bun. There were some additional calories.”

“Well,” Bam said, looking back, “if it’s the weekend I’m thinking of, breakfast consisted of half a cinnamon bun, some cigarettes… a beer or two.” Another smile slid onto his face. “I think we were drunk the entire time we were there, and we were supposed to get some work done. We were shooting a music video, weren’t we?” He shook his head, humored by how their business trips had always turned into crazy drunkenness. “We didn’t get shit done. We were just goofing around.”

“I remember that weekend,” Ville said after some time, an amused smile tugging at his lips. “I carried
you everywhere because you had lost your damn shoes.” He rolled his eyes, obviously still annoyed that Bam’s younger self could have been so careless. “I don’t get how someone can lose their shoes, let alone in a big city like that.” He paused for dramatic effect, trying his best to keep a straight face. “Only you could have done something so foolish.”

“Maybe I lost them on purpose,” the younger man suggested with a wry smile. “I got a free ride out of it, after all.”

Ville huffed. “And all I got out of it was a can of lukewarm beer. Tasted like piss, too.”

Bam laughed at the comment. “How d’you even know what piss tastes like, Walo?”

“Tastes like American beer, that’s all I know.”

The green-eyed man suddenly stood up from the couch, the leather groaning as it stretched out again, and for a moment, he simply stood there and watched Bam with a contemplative frown on his face. He felt conflicted. It dawned him how utterly absurd it was to be sitting backstage with Bam, talking about days long gone, and he wondered if he should have been angrier. But now that they were there, he found that all anger and bitterness he had once felt had withered. The past was irreversible, after all. No amount of bottled up hatred could change anything but the present – and he was too old to bicker with his exes.

“I…” he mumbled, reaching for the pack of cigarettes. “Do you want to head back to the hotel? And I’m simply assuming we’re staying at the same hotel.”

“Sure, man,” Bam agreed, rising from his chair. “And yeah, we are.”

“Come on then.” Ville nodded in direction of the door, his brow slightly creased. “I want to hear all about Phil and April on the way back,” he continued, smiling fondly to himself. “Oh, and Novak, what’s up with him nowadays? I heard that he’s sobered up…”

00:02 a.m.

Entering the suite felt like entering a museum. The walls were decorated with Chinese wallpapers from the 18th century, featuring exotic landscapes and women clad in colorful robes. Had Bam had a keen eye for detail, he would have noticed the original rococo furniture and the expensive artworks that littered the suite, but as he strode over to one of the pink, embellished armchairs, all he could think of was the man before him, so pale and chiseled he resembled a sculpture from the classical era. He stood by one of the large windows, his arms folded across his chest, and while he was not looking directly at Bam, he was smiling with newfound bravado. Bam found that smile to be particularly enchanting, but then again, he always had.

“And now he’s written a book, has he?”

Bam snorted. “Yeah, he wrote a book about his sobriety and how fucking awesome it is to be sober, but he’s had more than a few relapses.” He rolled his eyes, wondering how long he would last this time. In the end, the drugs came before all else, and things such as dignity and integrity became non-existent. “At least he’s making some money now – people are stupid enough to buy into it, after all, or just curious about who he fucked for heroin – and he won’t be leeching off me anymore.”

At that, Ville could barely stifle a laugh, pretending to cough. Bam raised a brow.

“What are you laughing at, Walo?”
Ville shook his head. “Oh, but you adore the little man, addict or not,” the Finn said, his green eyes dancing with mirth. “He did make ‘Viva La Bam’ slightly more interesting by simply being himself. I think he earned his living.”

“Yeah, well,” Bam said, arching a brow. “He’s still an idiot.”

Ville raised both hands in surrender. “I have no counter-arguments. The man can’t tell a mouse from an elephant. And personal hygiene seems to be a foreign concept.”

“Remember when he said you smelled like crap?”

Again, the Finn smiled. “Oh, yeah. I was offended because I knew it was the truth. How silly I used to be back then, Bam.”

“Or self-conscious,” the American added quietly as an afterthought.

“Yes, I suppose you’re right.” Ville heaved a sigh and started tracing the patterns on the wall with his forefinger, the texture sleek and smooth as glass. He started wondering who had painted the delicate lines, the brushstrokes as thin as eyelashes. Whoever it was had died several centuries ago, and although his or her art had withstood the ages, no one would ever know their face or name. It made him sad in a way, wistful almost, as was often the case with art. Was it Bob Dylan who once claimed that all art is born through some kind of pain? His albums felt very small and pitiful in comparison, little love songs for little women, but he knew he offered them some relief. Through exploring the depths of his own personal pain, he had made strangers happy. He smiled, realizing that Bam used physical pain to achieve the same result. They were entertainers, the two of them.

“… I,” Ville began, but looking up from the exquisite tapestry, he found himself staring into a pair of startlingly blue eyes. Were they the same eyes he had gazed into ten years ago? They were alike and yet not. These eyes seemed to hold too many raw secrets in them, the kind of secrets carried by those who have been to hell. His sweet and clueless Bammie had never been to hell, but this Bam – this stranger – had been there more than once.

“Willa,” Bam whispered, his voice hoarse all of a sudden. “None of the shit that went down back then matters anymore. After Ryan passed away, I realized how lucky I had been up until that point. I had never lost someone dear to me; I had always landed business deals without even paying attention. Everything just… everything fell into my lap. But after Ryan…” He closed his eyes. “After Ryan, I stopped being lucky.”

“It’s called growing up, Bam.”

The American nodded. “I’m aware of that,” he mumbled, stroking his beard. “No, what I meant to say is that, well, the things I berated you for… I went down the exact same path. And I get it now, Walo. I get it.”

“Don’t be such a queen, Bam,” Ville scolded him lightly. “If I remember correctly, I was the girly one.”

Bam grinned, his sorrow evaporating like dew on a sunny day.

“You were,” he agreed wholeheartedly.

For a moment, Ville’s heart wavered. Yes, impossibly long and lonely years had gone by, but his heart, young and old in all the wrong ways, gave in. His mind, on the other hand, was screaming for him to stop. But against his better judgment, he reached out and touched Bam’s face gently, feeling the creased skin under his fingertips. Bam appeared to be holding his breath, mildly surprised and
thoroughly pleased at the same time, and he said nothing, allowing the Finn to do with him as he wished.

“You used to be smoother than a baby’s arse,” the Finn lamented, though not without the slightest hint of amusement. “How come you look so different? It is very strange indeed. The last time I saw you, you were young and thin and so very upset with me.”

Bam laughed softly and said, “I think the alcohol had something to do with it,” in a weak tone of voice, as though he could not quite conceal his grief. He hated feeling old and ugly, but it was undeniable; he was no longer that beautiful young man, and the worst part of it? Even back then, he had never felt anything but inferior to his male friends. Where they had been muscular and tall, he had been shorter and skinnier. It had plagued him for years, until the emotional eating combined with his alcoholism had led to massive weight gain. Only then had he realize how stunning he had been at twenty-five.

“My poor Bam-Bam,” Ville whispered, his hand still cupping Bam’s cheek. His beard, coarse and thick, was new. He thought that it suited him, at least now that he was older. At a younger age, he had sometimes insisted upon not shaving for weeks. On those occasions, Ville had moaned about his stubble. It had looked more like pubic hair than a proper beard, and Ville had never been afraid to voice his thoughts on the matter.

“Willa,” Bam said, pulling away. “Don’t let the nostalgia get to you.”

Ville frowned and slumped back against the frame of the window, watching Bam with a stony expression on his face. Over the last couple of hours, he had warmed up to the skater, but now he felt reserved again.

“Isn’t that why you’re here, Bam?” he asked sullenly. “I can feel your eyes on me. I know what you’re thinking.”

“I’m here for-”

“Closure,” Ville finished for him, raising one brow. “You could’ve done that by simply calling me—or sending me an e-mail—but no, you had to come all the way to London.”

“I don’t…” Bam trailed off, smiling mirthlessly at the situation. The smile vanished when Ville let out a snort, and the American hated how he was glaring at him in that accusing, betrayed way. “I don’t know what else to say about that, Walo. But I’m not here to mess with your head, and I’m certainly not here to profess my undying love for you.”

As their eyes locked, a thick tension descended on them, silencing them. Ville heaved a sigh of annoyance and hurried out the door leading to the balcony, reaching for his nearly empty pack of cigarettes. Outside, the world seemed bereft of anything but sounds of traffic and drunkards talking loudly outside the pubs. Because of heavy light pollution, it was impossible to see the stars, but the moon, big and white, stood on the sky with unwavering determination.

“… You’ll catch a cold,” Bam pointed out from the doorway. “And you’ll be mad about not having any cigarettes left.”

“I don’t care,” Ville hissed, the cigarette dangling from his lips, and he started almost frenetically searching for his lighter. When he could not locate it and subsequently realized he had left it behind, he groaned and slid dejectedly into a big rattan armchair, slumping a little and leaning his head against the window sill. The weather was crisp and cold that day, and there was a light film of white snow covering the ground below. In an hour, it would be brownish mush and not snow. The Finn
closed his eyes and thought about his house an hour’s drive outside Helsinki. When he had last been there, the lake was just beginning to freeze over and it had been snowing quite heavily. Everything had been white and shimmering.

“Walo,” Bam said in a pleading tone of voice. “Get your ass inside. You can sulk in bed as much as you’d like, you know, but not out here in the fucking cold. I’ll leave if that’s what you want me to do.”

“I’m Finnish, sweetheart,” the singer argued with a thin smile on his lips. “I can handle a little bit of cold.”

“Walo, you’re half Hungarian, and your immune system isn’t the best. Probably has something to do with your asthma – and the stupid ass cigarettes.”

“And how come you have the right to interfere with how I live my life? I have been single for a decade, have no children, and quite frankly, the only people who truly care are my bandmates, or my parents, for that matter, but I’m sure they will perish before I do.”

Bam groaned. “Don’t be a cunt.”

“… Who are you to tell me not to?”

“I’m Bam, that’s who. And I don’t want to see you dying young. Is it that hard to believe? Ryan already tried that and it isn’t really working out that great.”

“… No, it isn’t,” the Finn mumbled, his eyes blinking open again. Bam was nibbling on his lower lip, a mournful look on his face, and Ville knew he was thinking about Ryan. Now that he was getting reacquainted with the skater, he could not help but to think that a part of him had died with Ryan on that fateful night. It was his youth.

“Come on, Walo. You’re just standing out here in the cold to prove a point, aren’t you?”

“Well, I was trying to smoke a cigarette, but the lighter grew legs and left for LA.”

Ville smiled at his own joke and got up from the armchair, walking over to the wrought iron railing. He gazed up at the moon, big and bright and beautiful, and drank in the cityscape. Whenever they traveled to London, they would stay at the same hotel. Built in 1784, the grand mansion had originally been some rich aristocrat’s home, but it had been converted into a hotel in the 1860s. Ville had always preferred old-fashioned hotels – furniture sat on by innumerable asses – because he felt as though they had more soul. He liked to think that all the faceless, nameless people who had stayed in the suite over the last couple of centuries had left their mark. For one reason or the other, he always felt like he left behind a part of himself, something other than hairs in the sink and dead skin cells in the bed. That was why he felt so at home there.

“I have often thought about the last time we saw one another,” he said suddenly, his eyes still glued to the moon and the starless black ocean of the sky. “My last memory of Castle Bam was Ryan waving me goodbye. He stood at the gate and waved and waved…” His voice became small toward the end of the sentence, a sentiment Bam sympathized with. Ville let out a deep breath, reliving that exact moment for the millionth time. “And then he was gone.”

“He really cared about you, Willa. Kept bugging me about talking to you and shit.”

Ville smiled stiffly. “I know.”

The skater put his hand on Ville’s arm, feeling how cold he was, and he promptly ushered him back
inside. The idiot was only wearing a tee-shirt and was shivering from the cold, and his Finnish heritage did nothing to keep him warm. Once inside, he sat down on a chair and watched Bam as he stood by the fireplace, fiddling with his bracelet and looking unsure about what to do with himself. Before he could ask, the Finn said, “You don’t have to leave. Not yet anyhow. You did come all this way for me, so it would be silly to leave so soon, wouldn’t it.”

Bam sighed again, staring at the beautiful man with a pained expression on his face.

“I’m sorry about just showing up here. It probably isn’t the best Christmas present you’ve ever received.”

“… Well, as it is, you are here and I can do nothing about it. Just…” Ville rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and yawned, clearly tired. “Just tell me whatever it is you need to tell me.”

Bam grimaced before sitting down in the same pink armchair. He had often considered what to say in this exact situation, but the words were suddenly gone and his mind was blank. After a moment’s pause, however, the skater managed to find his tongue and said, “I… I never understood… I never wanted to understand why you’d just disappear the way you did.”

“Before we broke up?”

“Yeah.”

Ville wrinkled his forehead. “I don’t remember much, to be absolutely honest. My memories from that time are hazy at best. The rest is completely non-existent, like a black hole.”

“I know,” the younger man whispered, aware of the dangers of alcohol. “After Ryan, I… I went down the exact same path. Sobering up wasn’t easy at all.” Bam paused, looking up. Their eyes met briefly, but Ville broke it off, once again staring at the wall and the intricate artwork, finding it hard to maintain eye contact. Bam cleared his throat before continuing, “It took every ounce of self-discipline to get through the withdrawals and cravings, and I didn’t have much of that stuff in me to begin with. Self-discipline, I mean. But I’ll say this… I understand now why you disappeared. I understand now why you didn’t answer me. And I’m so fucking sorry I didn’t understand it back then.”

The corners of Ville’s mouth lifted, though only slightly.

“I’m aware, Bam. You were too young and too inexperienced. Had I not been wallowing in self-pity, I would have understood that, and I would have understood that we weren’t good for one another.”

“Yeah,” Bam agreed in a breathless tone of voice. “But at the same time, I’ve never loved anyone but you.”

“You’ve been married twice,” Ville mumbled, rolling his eyes at the melodrama.

“But it wasn’t love.”

“Isn’t it quite childish to marry someone out of convenience and not love?”

Bam bit his lip, feeling guilty. “It isn’t like anyone wants to be all alone, Willa. I was scared and I needed someone to be there for me.”

The older man let out an unamused laugh, finding the argument to be both inconsiderate and reckless. He had lived on his own – without freeloading friends and an affectionate family nearby –
and yes, of course it had been difficult, but it had also been necessary. Through solitude, he had gained a better understanding of himself, and for the first time in all his life, he knew what internal happiness was. He also knew what integrity was, and never in a million years would he have married someone for anything but love.

“And did Missy and that other girl know that, hm?” he demanded, his voice dark and angry. “Did they know you’re gay? Because honestly Bam, if anyone’s gay, it’s you. Hiding it from yourself and the world, that is one thing – that is your right to privacy and your right to be living in denial – but hiding it from a woman who loves you, a woman who is your wife? That isn’t alright, Bam. Surely even you can understand as much.”

“Like you’re one to speak,” Bam snapped back. “What about Jonna, huh?”

“I never lied to her. We never loved one another, and both of us knew that.”

“Don’t you get sick of eating your own lies?” Bam asked angrily, wondering how blind one man could be to his own actions. “She was just a stupid brat, Walo. Of course she found you fascinating and beautiful, and of course she was in love with you! Just because you weren’t and just wanted to sleep around doesn’t mean that every beautiful person on the planet is the same as you!”

Ville looked as if taken aback by the blunt statement. A trace of coolness lit up in his eyes, and for the umpteenth time that day, he so wished for another cigarette.

“You think I take advantage of people?” he asked, his voice low and measured. “Is that it, Bam?”

“I think you did back then.”

“Much has happened in the meantime, Bam. I live on my own – I have for years and years – and guess what? I never even had a girlfriend, or a boyfriend, and I haven’t fooled anyone into marrying my sorry ass either. No, I have been my own friend, and I am quite content. I am quite content not having my marital life on public display, too. And I am certainly content not hating a partner who is not actually my partner, which sounds like hell, by the way.”

His response silenced the skater. It left him dumbfounded. Often, if he had been particularly bitter about the breakup, which happened every now and then, he had googled Ville, but to no avail. There were plenty of juicy articles about the band as a whole, but Ville, who had always been in the limelight, had simply stopped answering questions about his personal life. An aura of mystery had surrounded him for the longest time, or maybe it was an aura of coldness? Bam supposed the media storm that had been his life had spooked him. Seeing him fall, and seeing Ryan fall, could have spooked the sturdiest of men.

“… Don’t you get lonely?” he asked, offering Ville a sad smile. “I’d like, I don’t know, I’d die or something.”

“There is something about knowing yourself inside out, Bam,” the singer explained with a hint of tiredness to his voice. “If you don’t know yourself, well, then silence and solitude will be your enemies in life. But if you know yourself, you will never be alone. I never gave myself time to explore who I am, and the more time I spent doing just that, the less depressed I felt.”

“So, no more brooding and shit?”

Ville shrugged. “I’m an artist, Bam. I have to use my experiences to affect my listeners.”

“I’d still die.”
“Alright, perhaps you would, Bam.”

The singer smiled a knowing smile and got up from the chair to fetch a sweater, still feeling cold. As he pulled the knitted item over his head, Bam raised a brow and laughed. It was the ugliest Christmas sweater he had ever seen, green and yellow with reindeers everywhere. Ville laughed a little himself and said, “I got it from a fan in Italy, who thought it was ‘typical wear for an atypical Finn’. It is so terrible it can be considered a fashion statement. I’m still waiting for some gossip magazine to point it out.”

“Everything looks good on you though,” Bam said, shaking his head. “How come you age so well? It’s fucking unfair.”

“Well.” Ville clicked his tongue. “At least you’re not fat anymore.”

“That’s below the belt, Walo,” the younger man grumbled, feeling somewhat embarrassed. “I wasn’t really… well.”

“You look good, Bam,” the green-eyed man was quick to say, and a self-satisfied smirk slid onto his face. “More muscular. And the gray suits you.”

Bam was at a loss for words. “That’s… that’s stretching it a bit, Walo.”

“Suit yourself, Bam,” the Finn said shortly, schooling his voice to indifference. “I simply assumed you were fishing for compliments.”

The crude comment had the skater stifling a nervous laugh, both surprised and somewhat offended. He had, however, known Ville for nearly two decades and was well-acquainted with his skin-deep arrogance and the aloofness that came with it. As always before though, his eyes were what gave him away. In them, Bam saw something raw and vulnerable – a flicker of hope, perhaps – and his heart softened. He willed a smile to his lips, choosing to avoid conflict, and said, “Nah, I already know I’m ugly. Fishing for compliments won’t change a thing.”

“That in itself is fishing for compliments, isn’t it?” the older man asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I don’t know.” Bam shrugged, and as he caught Ville’s eyes, he grinned and asked, “Did it work?”

The Finn rolled his eyes and said, “Honestly, Bam,” in something like a sigh. “We’ve fucked, have we not? Shouldn’t think I needed to elaborate on such a matter.” His eyebrow slowly arched upward, almost asking the question before his tongue could articulate it. “Do you truly think I’d sleep with someone I wasn’t attracted to?”

“That was before,” the short-haired man pointed out. “I was hot back then.”

“Bam,” Ville groaned. “You’re the same man, just a little bulkier. That isn’t necessarily a bad thing, you know? I still find you attractive – perhaps even more-,” he stopped himself, his eyes wide open as he realized what he had just said, and he grew very quiet for a moment, his cheeks reddening. “And yes, goddamn it,” he said, sounding resigned. “It worked. There, you’ve got your bloody compliment.”

He laughed and said, “You’re taking me way too fucking seriously, you know.”

The tall man slid dejectedly into his seat and all but glared at his ex-boyfriend, a sullen expression on his lean, sculpted face. When he raked his fingers through the wealth of wild, brown curls, Bam ached to touch him, to relive those lovely memories that haunted him as much as they warmed him.
The sex was just part of the experience, of course, and their relationship had been so much more than that. Among the memories he treasured the most were nights spent at the cabin by the lake – oftentimes under the starlit canvas of the night sky – and the evenings he had been completely knackered and Ville had just sung to him. That man had always understood his needs, whatever they might be.

“… I must confess, I really did think that someone had perished,” Ville admitted when the silence became too pressing.

“Hold on,” Bam said, his voice slightly alarmed. “What d’you mean?”

“I thought that maybe April had passed away,” he said, his gaze fixed on the tapestry again. “Since I hadn’t seen or heard from you in so many years, I just thought…” He wrinkled his forehead, looking as if he was still convinced that he was the bearer of grim news. When their eyes met again, he asked, “Well, why would you be here unless something terrible had happened?” and gave a breathless chuckle.

“No one’s dead, Walo,” the skater assured him, and then he suddenly remembered his mission, or the cause of his mission. He cleared his throat and said, “There’s something you need to see though,” and got up from the armchair, reaching into his hip pocket to find his wallet and the picture therein.

The Finn started fidgeting with his rings, his shoulders tense.

“Okay.”

“No bad news, I promise.”

“Alright, Bam. What is it?”

He sat down next to the singer on the couch, close enough that their jeans-clad thighs were touching, and handed him the worn, tattered photo. It appeared small and fickle in his large, delicate hand, and Bam, who had treasured this particular piece of paper for years, hoped that its significance would not be lost on the Finn. His emerald eyes studied the photo intently for a couple of slow seconds, and at first, he opened his mouth to ask what on earth this was supposed to be, but then, as soon as he recognized it, he just shook his head in silent wonderment. When he dared to meet the younger man’s eyes, all he could say was, “Is this what I think it is?” in a rough voice.

“Yeah,” the skater confirmed. “Ryan… Ryan kept it for me.” He gave a raw, pained laugh and, without thinking about it, he leaned his head against Ville’s shoulder. “For eleven fucking years. Dunno how he did it. He came to see me a week before he died – I was going away for a few days, so he wanted to hang out – and we talked about me and Missy. He pointed out that it was doomed from the start, ‘cause I was in love with someone else…” He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep, shuddering breath. “And he gave me the photo back.”

Ville looked like he had been slapped by an invisible hand. His face drained of all color.

“Bam,” he whispered, and Bam drew back a little and noticed that tears were shimmering in his eyes. He put the photo down on the coffee table and reached for Bam’s hand, wrapping it tightly in both of his. Bam’s heart thudded hard against his ribcage, his neck hair standing up. For all that he wanted to, he could not stop staring at their hands.

“I… shit, I…” The Finn drew in a sharp breath, his mind a mess, so full of things he wanted to say. “Ryan called me two days before he… before he died. He wanted me to stay in touch with you – to make amends – but I brushed him off. I thought you hated me,” he whispered silently, almost
inaudibly. “I didn’t dare to make that call, Bam. I’m so sorry.”

Guilt and self-reproach weighed him down, and as he studied the photo of his old self, he felt nothing but disgust. He remembered that photoshoot. Like so many other photoshoots, he had been dolled up and sexed up, and he had been as compliant as a sheep, parting his lips in a seductive pose and revealing too much skin. But for all that it stung, it also amused him. This was the photo that had made Bam fall in love with him for the first time, and while it was shallow, it was also sickeningly sweet. Bam had been twenty years old, just a kid, really, and too innocent to comprehend what had hit him: one of Cupid’s big-ass arrows.

“Yeah, me neither,” Bam said without mentioning how he had loathed Ville back then. “I guess what I wanted to say is that, well, Ryan wanted this…” He sighed, feeling frustrated with himself for his inability to voice his thoughts. When Ville gave his hand a gentle squeeze, however, the words came flowing. “He wanted us to work things through. I guess he saw all the shit I was too blind to see. He knew me better than I really even knew myself back then…”

Bam shook his head; he was completely overwhelmed by grief. Ryan had influenced his life more than anyone else over the years, and his death had been like the death of a brother. As he mulled it over in his mind, he felt physical pangs of pain through his body. Longing for him was an unyielding curse. He would have to live with it for the rest of his life, and that sucked.

“And if it hadn’t been for him, I never would’ve understood how I felt about you,” he finished, now feeling almost dizzy at the impact of his own words. “If he hadn’t given me that photo…”

“He was brilliant,” Ville said, sounding forlorn. “Oh, Bammie. I’m so sorry.”

Bam was about to protest – was about to say that it absolutely was not Ville’s fault – but the moment their eyes locked, all words evaporated from his mind.

“…You’re crying,” the Finn whispered, his thumb suddenly on his cheek, wiping away tears that had escaped his eyes without his knowledge. “Don’t cry, Bam-Bam.”

The hand moved to cup his cheek, his touch gentle but weighty enough to keep him anchored to the spot. It was hard to tell whether they were caught in a moment of naïve nostalgia or in a fresh, blooming attraction for one another, but it hardly mattered, not when Ville brushed his thumb across his lip. They parted under his touch, eager to taste him. Ville, enthralled by the sight and the sensation of that warm mouth, found that he could not move. When the skater’s tongue pressed against his finger, he let out a surprised gasp. His lips locked around his finger entirely, and his eyes, huge and blue, stared at him with something like determination.

“Bam,” he said hoarsely, forcing his eyes shut and withdrawing his hand. “We’re too old for playing silly games.”

The younger man sat up straight, though acutely aware of how their thighs were still touching. He said nothing about what had happened, he just stared at the Finn while chewing the inside of his cheek, his blood feeling thick and slow in his veins. He detected the bulge in the green-eyed man’s jeans and felt like fondling him; he wanted to touch him until he was a hot, flustered mess, until he moaned his name.

“…I should…” he began to say, his tongue feeling heavy in his mouth. “Fuck, man,” he said and gave a nervous laugh, his eyes focused on the photo on the coffee table. “I should leave, shouldn’t I? I just…”

He just wanted him. He wanted him badly.
Ville nodded. “Yeah, I…”

None of them said another word. The American cleared his throat and got up from the couch, shoving his hands into his pockets. Ville followed his example and got up from the chair. He straightened his shirt with long, nervous strokes, possibly stalling for time, before walking Bam to the ‘hallway’ of the suite.

The American cleared his throat. “It was… it was good seeing you again,” he said and put on his jacket.

“Yeah.” The singer willed a smile to his lips, one that would not have convinced even the blind. “Good of you to come all this way.” Strange how transparent those words felt. The blue-eyed man nodded, smiled and turned to face the door. Never had anyone been so slow to exit a room, Ville thought. He seemed to be having a staring contest with the door.

“Goodbye, Bam,” he heard himself saying, his voice oddly thick.

“I…”

Bam was about to leave, his white-knuckled fingers clutching at the doorknob. Another closed door, Ville thought, just like the one that had been shut ten years ago. Now he would not see him again, of that he was certain, and he would have to get reacquainted with the idea of solitude, of spending his days and years alone in the house in the woods. And because there had never been anyone but Bam in his life, save Jonna and a few other women, the emptiness would be his only companion. Because of a string of unfortunate misunderstandings, he would have to be a bachelor forever. At this, fear and panic rolled though him like a chilled, dark wave, and his heart, already weakened by exhaustion, was rapping against his ribs, screaming ‘stop, stop, stop!’ until all he heard was a loud ringing in his ears.

“Bye, Walo.”

Ville opened his mouth but no words came, his mind going from overfilled to blank in a second. As Bam opened the door, however, he lunged forward and hugged him tightly, determined not to let him close that door for a second time; determined to give it another shot, because really, what had they to lose? They, these two confused old men who had held on to their bitter anger for too many years already, had nothing to lose but what had already been lost.

“… Please,” was all the Finn could think of saying – all that was not in Finnish and did not involve cussing him out – and the American tensed under his touch. “Pl-please,” he said again, his voice shattered by the weight of his emotions. His eyes filled with tears anew and he could do nothing but beg.

“Walo…”

“Please, Bam-Bam… I-I…”

An elderly man walked down the hallway just then, his footsteps echoing along the hallway, and he accidentally caught a glimpse of the odd pair in the doorway. He offered them a friendly smile and said, “Good evening,” although it was in the middle of the night, and swiftly disappeared out of sight.

Bam said nothing, though he giggled a little at the old man who had gotten an eyeful and closed the door. Ville groaned, embarrassed, and hid his face in the crook of the younger man’s neck. When Bam tried to free himself from his constraints, Ville’s arms only tightened around him. The American
rolled his eyes but stopped struggling, and for a good five minutes, they just stood there, their bodies pressed together from head to toe, the room shrouded in a silence that was neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

“Oh, Gods. What a night,” the Finn said with a sigh, breathing in the familiar scent of his skin. It reminded him of the safety of Castle Bam – of April’s homemade meals and that delightful tea she had brewed, of his and Ryan’s rather philosophical conversations – and it reminded him of their bed. Of lazy mornings spent kissing one another silly. Of steamy nights. Showers. The granite worktops in the kitchen. Oh, and the pool.

“You’re the one making a scene,” Bam pointed out. “That old guy got himself a real show.”

“… I didn’t want you to leave,” the older man said quietly, his hands searching out Bam’s, clasping them tightly.

“… Willa,” the skater said after a second or two, and while the Finn could not see his face, he knew – he heard – that he was smiling. “I’m not going anywhere, alright? You don’t have to restrain me.”

“Perhaps I want to restrain you,” he whispered flirtatiously, his breath hot against the American’s ear. Bam’s toes curled inside his sneakers, and he had to struggle to keep his voice steady as he asked, “Is that so?” with just the right hint of mischief coloring his words.

Ville pressed an open-mouthed kiss to his neck, just below the ear, and Bam let out an appreciative sigh, leaning his head back to grant him better access. Lowering his lips to the base of his neck, he placed a trail of feathery kisses along his neck, then his jaw and cheek. Years had gone by since his last encounter, but even back then, he had not wanted anything but to sate the need. This was different; this had always been different, and he felt childishly eager as he slipped his hand under Bam’s tee-shirt, smoothing his palms over his taut muscles.

Bam suddenly decided that he wanted to be in charge of this and broke free from Ville’s arms. Before the Finn could react, the American grabbed his wrists, pinning him against the wall.

“Fuck,” Bam whispered, peering into the emerald eyes that were so familiar, though not entirely. He saw traces of the young rockstar in there, no doubt about it, but a new dimension had been added to his person, this person who had sobered up and regained control of his life. How he wished to get to know this Willa better, to grow accustomed to all his odd quirks and habits, and because he could not quite articulate such sentiments right then and there, all he said was, “Fucking hell,” under his breath, a ragged laugh slipping from his lips.

Ville gave a snort and said, “I see your vocabulary hasn’t changed much,” in that snarky manner Bam had not realized he had missed. “Perhaps I ought to lend you my diction-”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Willa, are you fucking serious? You’re such a killjoy,” the younger man complained, but really, he was all smiles. “That hasn’t changed much either.”

Ville frowned, clearly offended, and he started protesting, saying, “I’m not a kill-”

“Walo,” he said, laughing a little. “Shut up for a second, will you?”

And before the singer could protest for a second time, the American covered his mouth with his, silencing whatever crass insult he had intended to hurl at him. Ville gave a startled squeak at first, his heart hammering like a fist inside his chest, and then, when all his thoughts had been washed away by the soft press of Bam’s lips, he relaxed, closing his eyes and abandoning himself to the moment. The kiss was different than he had expected – at least different from the rose-tinted memories of their
past kisses. It felt as familiar as it felt foreign. And more importantly, it felt real. Bam’s beard rasped against his face, not unpleasantly, and his hand had moved to caress his cheek. When they eventually pulled apart, the hand slid down to his neck, settling just underneath his jawbone.

“… You’re still the most beautiful guy I’ve ever seen.”

The Finn scowled at the compliment and muttered, “I’m utterly disinterested in being objectified by you, Bam Margera.”

The American paid him no heed and kissed him for a second time. What started out as a slow and tender kiss quickly turned into something far less innocent. Ville parted his lips, allowing him to deepen the kiss, and he smiled inwardly as he found that he recognized the flavor. Time had not warped every aspect of their lives, it would seem, and even if it was just the taste of him, it was enough to make him feel giddy. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach with renewed energy, making him giggle, breaking the kiss. He had not felt butterflies in what felt like a century.

“Willa,” the American whispered, his mouth hovering just over his. “What’s so goddamn funny about this?”

“Oh, nothing,” the Finn said, a goofy smile playing on his lips. He licked them and tasted the remnants of their kiss – of Bam – and he felt comforted. When the younger man nuzzled his neck, his hands settling on his waist, Ville let out an appreciative sigh and melted into the embrace. For the first time in weeks, he did not feel like running down to the kiosk to buy another pack of cigarettes – or a bottle of vodka, for the matter. Not that he had broken his oath, no, but that did not mean that life was merciful enough not to test and tempt him with all the things he could not indulge in. This was, however, an exception to the rule.

“… Bedroom?” Bam asked, and then he cringed, hearing how that request sounded. “Uh, I didn’t mean-”

“Oh, yes you did, my little American,” the Finn said with a laugh. If anything, Bam was uncomplicated and straightforward, and to Ville, the perfect picture of a tortured artist, such simplicity was a breath of fresh air. “And no, you most certainly aren’t taking it back – I will not allow it.”

Bam’s eyes widened a little, and then he flashed that charismatic smile of his, the one Ville had never been able to resist.

“So,” the younger man said in a suggestive tone of voice. “Bedroom?”

“Yes, my darling.” Ville pressed a kiss to his forehead, feeling the slight crease of his brow. A smirk slid onto his face as he added, “Let me see just how beautiful you think I am,” in a deliberately low voice.

They quickly moved to the bedroom; to the spacious canopy bed with its thick duvets and ridiculously oversized pillows. Bam all but threw Ville on the bed, his arms as strong and muscular as the rest of him, and Ville, still rakishly thin, could do little to fight him off. He had always hated being treated as a girl, something Bam had done unwittingly for as long as they had known each other. But on that particular evening, he found that he did not mind the special treatment.

“… You’re beautiful,” the American said as he climbed on top of him, straddling him. “So fucking beautiful.”

Ville could not keep himself from rolling his eyes, muttering, “No more than you, surely.”
“Jesus, Willa,” he said with a snicker. “Learn to take a compliment, will you.”

Another drugging kiss was shared, melting their thoughts away. With shaky hands, Bam started unbuttoning Ville’s shirt, fumbling with the buttons. He swore under his breath as he struggled with what he deemed to be a very unnecessary piece of clothing, which made the older man laugh, amused.

“Don’t be nervous, darling,” he said, clasping his hands around Bam’s. “We’ve been here before, haven’t we?”

“It’s been ten years.”

“Surely you’ve unbuttoned your fair share of shirts since then.”

Bam frowned at the comment, detecting the sexual innuendo, and said, “Like you haven’t.”

“Come to think of it, I own quite a few shirts. Astonishingly, they all require manual buttoning – and unbuttoning.”

“You’re really quite funny,” Bam said, his lips curving into a devilish little smile. “In a bitter, caustic kind of way.”

Before the singer could think of a clever retort, the blue-eyed man grabbed a hold of his shirt collar and ripped it open, black buttons flying everywhere. Ville let out a sharp gasp, completely caught off guard by this uncharacteristic display of power.

“… Why on earth did you do that?” he wanted to know, pushing his palms against Bam’s chest. “That was my finest shirt-”

“Thought you just said you own ‘quite a few shirts’, the American teased, his fingers tracing the outline of his ribcage until he found two erect nipples waiting for him, rolling them between his fingertips. Ville stifled a moan, the touch intense. Had it been back in his heyday, back when he had banged models and pretty fangirls on a weekly basis, this touch would have been insignificant, but now? He has been as prudent as a priest for nearly four years, even neglected by his own hand. This was like manna from heaven.

“I… I do,” he grumbled, angry with himself for getting so flustered over what was essentially nothing. “But that shirt was new and fit me well, and I rarely…” He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. ‘I rarely ever find shirts that fit me’ seemed too gloomy a statement for the occasion, and Bam was not blind. Ville, for all that he was tall, was bony and gaunt. He was far too thin for a man of forty-one. He mostly blamed it on the cigarettes, pushing the truth aside, and the truth was, of course, that his diet was a minimalistic disaster, enabled by nicotine.

“Help me out, will you,” Bam said as he started pulling at the now buttonless shirt. Ville abandoned his train of thought and complied to the request, lifting his torso from the mattress. When the shirt lay discarded on the floor, the younger man unbuttoned and unzipped his tight-fitting jeans and peeled them off his long legs, cursing a little when he had to remove his shoes before the jeans could come off.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Willa,” he complained, voice low. “You’re wearing too much clothes.”

The Finn snickered and said, “Less talking will get the job done.”

At that, the skater smirked. Only the purple underpants were left, a beautiful contrast to his pale, spotless skin. His eyes strayed to the bulge that seemed to reach out for him, and he felt a fluttering
feeling in his guts, a feeling he had nearly forgotten about. Ville let out an impatient sound, his eyes dark with want, and Bam was only too happy to comply. His hands slid up his thighs, smooth and warm. It was enough to make him shiver, a soft gasp falling from his lips. Bam watched him with desire rippling through his joints, and his fingers curled around the waistband of his underpants, pulling them down and throwing them away.

“All done,” he breathed, and indeed, Ville was suddenly gloriously naked. A warm, girlish blush pinked his cheeks, and when he eventually dared to meet Bam’s gaze, his pink went full-on scarlet. Not that he would admit it, but he felt rather self-conscious, and as a means of distracting himself, he started twisting the silver rings on his fingers. Now that every inch of skin was on display, did he find him hideous? Years had gone by and he was not the strapping young man he had once been.

The mood changed abruptly the moment Bam started yanking down his own pants. Ville let go of his anxieties, his eyes hungry as they drank in the sight of him.

“You look different,” Ville said once his jacket and tee-shirt had come off, his eyes studying the abundance of scars and tattoos, and of course, the roll of excess skin around his middle, a result of the rapid weight loss.

“Um, it’s… it’s better than it used to be,” the skater mumbled, his voice small, and while he said this, he kept his eyes fixed on the light switch. “I just… I know it isn’t what it was when we were together… I didn’t take care of myself for a long, long time, and this… this is what I’m left with.” When he stopped talking, their eyes met briefly, and Bam looked away again, clearly embarrassed about the state of his body.

“Oh, Bam-Bam,” the Finn said, almost laughing. “What are you even talking about?”

“… I’ll turn off the lights, if that’s alright with you?”

“It absolutely isn’t ‘alright’,” he said, sounding rather appalled.

“You said-”

“I said you look different,” Ville said softly, patiently, and stood up from the bed, holding his hand out. Bam hesitated for a moment but took his hand, the touch enough to make his breath hitch. “So do I, Bam. Now, let’s stop being idiots. I haven’t had a good fuck in ages.” He grinned as he said the latter, his free hand reaching for his abdomen. The excess skin was just that, skin, and underneath were toned muscles. This new Bam was sturdy and athletic and had most likely developed an exercise addiction, something that was not unheard of among recovering alcoholics. His eyes gleamed dangerously as he whispered, “Besides, you’re much sexier than you were back then, silver fox,” into his ear, making him shiver. Funny that, the singer thought to himself, and he felt a small twinge of satisfaction. His voice always had been arousing to the skater.

“… Walo,” he said, his eyes closed. Then, as he felt a hand between his legs, they fluttered open. Ville’s green eyes were glued to his; in them he saw curiosity and adoration and want. And unsurprisingly, his already half hard dick reacted to the touch, proudly rising to the challenge.

“I prefer ‘Willa’,” the Finn murmured, a lopsided smile tugging at his lips. “Only from you, though.”

The American wanted to say something; wanted to kiss him until he was out of breath; wanted to tell him how lonely life had been without his ‘Willa’. But before he could get a word in, the Finn crouched down before him on the carpeted floor, his swollen lips parting. And in the millisecond before he took him in his mouth, he glanced up, offering him one of those precious Mona Lisa smiles. For the entirety of the five minutes he lasted, Bam was in heaven, and heaven, it seemed, was
in Ville’s mouth.
What We Found in the Park

Chapter Notes

This has been a wild ride. Writing it was a lot of fun though :) I might add some notes for something of an epilogue later on. I wrote something a while ago. It could shed some light on how Ville felt about it all.

Btw, this is probably my favorite chapter. Just thought to say so :P

Thank you for reading :)

06:07 a.m.         18.12.2017

His eyes fluttered open, and he blinked a couple of times, squinting at his surroundings. The heavy red curtains blocked out the white winter sun, leaving the room in a state of darkness. He could, however, hear the sound of Bam’s slumberous breathing – and the occasional snore. He could feel the weight of a muscular arm draped around his waist, the warmth of a broad chest pressed against his back, and the morning wood poking at his bum. They were still naked. Skin was touching skin. An amused expression quirked up the side of his mouth as he thought about last night. It had been everything. Was everything.

The Finn let out a content sigh with his face buried in his pillow and snuggled deeper into bed. Bam shifted a little in his sleep, inching closer. His breath warmed his neck, tickling him. Ville giggled, allowing the happiness of their reunion, if one could call it such, to soak right into his bones. Over the last few years, happiness had become a rather abstract concept – something others got to experience and he had to watch from afar. The closest he had come to finding true happiness had been in writing poetry and song lyrics, and the more he had written in Finnish, the harder it had become to get that same natural flow of words when writing in English. The more he had sung songs in Finnish, always armed with his acoustic guitar, the harder it had become to walk up on that stage to sing little love songs for little women, and his life had become terribly predictable, and ultimately, it had become unhappy. But this was different. He had found happiness where he had least expected to find it; he had found it in Bam’s arms.

But how infantile was it not to think such thoughts? Ville’s eyes snapped open as he remembered the tattered photo that had been left on the coffee table, a curiosity from their past. Or rather, it was a telling piece of evidence. It had taken no more than a beautiful photo of Ville for Bam to fall head over heels in love with him. And that begged the question: Was Bam just another one of those people who wanted to fetishize him? To sexualize and fantasize about him? To glorify him for his so-called beauty?

A dark feeling gripped around his heart. It was fear. He feared that he had made a horrible mistake last night, the kind of mistake one makes when one is fragile. Ville was fragile, no doubt about it. He was fragile in that he had not been intimate with anyone in years.

“… Cigarettes,” he muttered to himself, remembering that he only had two left – and his lighter was missing.

“Mm… Willa, don’t go,” the skater rasped as his lover attempted to detangle himself from the
“Cigarettes,” he repeated. “Need to get to the kiosk.”

Bam groaned and rolled over, hugging the spare duvet instead. If he had not been so suspicious, he would have laughed at the pitiful sight. But rather than laugh, he made a dash for the door and closed it behind him with a soft thud. He remained stood in the living room of the suite for some time, his mind a mess. Questions attacked him from every side. How could he, after ten years, give in without a fight? How could he, after ten years, put his anger aside as if it was nothing? As if Bam had never wronged him in the slightest?

He needed nicotine – now. A string of profanities fell from his lips as he remembered that he was stark naked and had to sneak back inside the bedroom to grab his clothes, most of which littered the carpeted floor. His socks were nowhere to be found until he noticed that he had never taken them off in the first place. As he stood by the bed, getting dressed, he heard that Bam was sound asleep. How on earth could he sleep in, today of all mornings, without jolting awake, overwhelmed by feelings of regret?

Back in the living room, he noticed the photo on the coffee table. His own likeness – with that stupidly seductive smile on his lips – struck him as being downright offensive.

“… Idiot,” he told himself sternly and stashed the photo away in his pocket. As he wandered down the hallway, he felt tears blurring his vision. They had made a mistake. He had made a mistake.

… Or had he? He loved Bam. He always had loved the stupid wanker, in spite of his flaws and hopelessly childlike nature. But Bam had never loved him. If he had loved him, he never would have given up on their relationship without a fight. He never would have replaced him with those airheads. Never would have ignored him. And the heartbreak – his first proper heartbreak – had nearly cost him his life. As soon as the pain had stopped, he had become numb, and love? He had presumed it to be dead. Now he had again been used for his body – a plaything and nothing more – and Bam, who quickly grew bored with his toys, would throw him away. He did not want to suffer through another one of those heartbreaks, but it seemed improbable that he should escape its claws.

As he exited the hotel and was greeted by the cold, white sun, tears were streaming down his face.

09:52 a.m.

Bam woke up to an empty bed. He had a vague memory of Ville leaving – something about cigarettes and the kiosk – but was unsure of how many hours had passed. Perhaps he had returned to the suite, found that Bam was still in Neverland, and had decided to attend the hotel breakfast with Linde and the other guys. His brow furrowed as he thought about Ville downstairs in the hotel restaurant, hanging out with his colleagues like nothing had happened. Maybe he was in the living room, reading?

“Walo!” he called out, but no response came.

Bam frowned. This was not how he had imagined their first morning together, not that he had imagined a whole lot, just that they would spend it together. And maybe, if Ville was in the mood for it, they could have gone down to Madame Tussauds or some museum, he could not care less about which, really, and hold hands, talk about the weather and have a blast.

He yawned and reached for his iPhone, curious about how long he had slept. When he looked at the
screen, his eyes widened. He had twenty-one missed calls and had received about a dozen text messages. One was from Jess, which said, *I know you’ve lied and you’re there with the Finnish cunt. Mom is beside herself with worry. Are you ok? Remember: no drinking. And no ass-fucking.*

The message, which had of course been designed to push his every goddamn button, annoyed him, but then again, he was so used to Jess’ homophobia it failed to properly infuriate him. He wrote a message back: *Sorry, didn’t see your text. Already been ass-fucked. Twice. Was good. You should give it a try. Or at least pull the stick out of your ass.*

He then noted that Line had tried to call him twice. The last text message he had received – about fifteen minutes ago – was also from Linde. It said: *Where are you two lovebirds? Breakfast is almost over.*

That caught his attention. He wrote back: *Willa isn’t with you guys?*

Linde called him.

“Ville isn’t here, no,” was the first thing he said. “He isn’t with you?”

“No, I woke up and he wasn’t in bed-”

“Oh!” Linde exclaimed. “I feel I should be protective and say don’t mess with our frontman, but he isn’t really out frontman anymore, so just do as you will with him.”

“Hey, I don’t like your tone, buddy,” Bam said, now smiling. “It’s Willa who’s doing things to me-”

“No-o,” Linde groaned. “No details. I just ate.”

The skater grinned and asked, “Was it sausages?”

“… Let’s not discuss my breakfast.”

“Ha-ha, wuss! And nope, Willa isn’t here. He left to go buy some cigarettes some hours ago…” He trailed off, suddenly realizing how bizarre that statement sounded. Who in their right mind wakes up at 07:00 a.m. on a Saturday to get cigarettes and then fails to return? He hesitated for a moment before asking, “D’you think we should go look for him?”

“That might be a good idea, yes.” The Finn sighed and said something to the other guys in Finnish. Bam recognized the word *kusipää* – idiot – and when he realized it was aimed at Ville, an involuntary twitch cracked the edges of his mouth. Linde turned his attention back to Bam and said, “He’s unpredictable, you know,” with a sigh. “Thinks so much his brain is probably fried.”

Bam did know that. Ville had a pessimistic outlook on life, a trait that certainly did not go hand in hand with his constant brooding, and as a result, his mood swings could be quick, unpredictable and, at the worst of times, dangerous.

“I’ll meet you in the lobby in five.”

When Linde hung up on him, he immediately tried to call Ville. It was no use; his terrifyingly old Nokia started buzzing from where it lay forgotten on the floor. Bam frowned. The damn thing must have fallen out of his pocket last night. This meant that Ville – probably the most famous Finn to have ever lived – was walking around in London without his fucking phone. It was impossible to get in touch with him. And like Linde had pointed out, his state of mind was most likely troubled, burdened by self-imposed and self-composed grievances. To Ville, Bam realized, happiness was nothing but an ill omen. Their night together, well, it had been happy, had it not? Bam started
chewing on the inside of his cheek, hoping the singer had just gotten lost and nothing more sinister.

“… Fuck,” he muttered under his breath and got dressed in a hurry. Just as he was about to leave the suite to meet up with the guys, his phone started ringing. Thinking it was Linde, possibly even Ville, he was quick to answer.

“… Bam?” April asked, sounding surprised that her youngest had been so quick to answer – or that he had answered at all. “Are you there?”

“Hey, Mom,” he said, struggling to keep his voice devoid of disappointment. “Look, I’m kinda in the middle of something. Can I call you back?”

“Jess says-”

“I’m with Willa,” he said without thinking. “I’ll tell you all about it later! Love you, bye!”

“Ba-”

He hung up on her and ran to the elevator, pushed the button repeatedly until the doors opened and consequently scared the living shit out of an elderly woman, who clutched her purse tightly and fixed him with an icy glare. Had he not been in a hurry, he most likely would have thrown money at her to show her that he had no intent of robbing a senior citizen, thank you very much! He instead gave her a curt, “Morning,” and stared at the closed doors, willing the elevator move faster.

Linde looked positively hung-over, his eyes bloodshot and his skin pale.

“The others are out searching,” he said, offering the skater a sympathetic look. “He’s probably just hiding out somewhere to sulk in peace.”

“I just don’t get what there’s to sulk about. We didn’t argue or anything like that.”

The blond smiled knowingly and said, “No, I suppose you were busy pursuing other activities.”

Well, that was one way to put it. Color rushed to his cheeks as he said, “Something like that,” and glanced down at his shoes. He wondered if Ville had woken up, repulsed to find Bam in his bed, and had headed out into the cold streets of London just to get away from him.

“He’s just overwhelmed, Bam,” the Finn reasoned, having read his mind. “You had months to give this, um, this reconciliation thought, and I bet it’s still hard to process, but Ville…”

“What?”

“… He’s been grieving you for so many years, Bam,” the blond informed him, and through bleary eyes, he watched the entrance door without missing a face. People came and went, but none of them were Ville. “I think it was only last year the wounds started healing. He started moving on, and then you just show up here like – I don’t know, Bam, like nothing happened.” He shook his head, his long dreads falling over his shoulder. After a quiet, thoughtful moment, he said, “Bam, I know he can be moody, like a teenage girl, but come on, even you would have been shocked. Ville must think you’re only here to get your fix, so to speak.”

“… Ma-an, this is bad,” Bam muttered, lines in between his eyebrows. “Right, we’ll just…I’ll go see if I can find that kiosk he was talking about.”

The Finn nodded in agreement and said, “If it’s the one I think it is, you just have to go down to the park.” He frowned as though he had just remembered something. “Did you walk through a park to
get here last night?”

“Yeah, I think I know the place.”

“Okay. You go that way, and I’ll go to the Camden markets.” Linde then offered him a caring smile, momentarily reminding him of Ryan, and said, “He just needs some time to wrap his head around it,” and gave his shoulder a squeeze. As they walked out the door and saw that it was snowing, they exchanged worried glances and hurried down the street in opposite directions. While walked hurriedly toward the park, he tried to remember whether or not Ville had brought his jacket along.

10:34 a.m.

He would have spotted that hilariously hideous reindeer sweater from a mile away. Ville sat on a park bench by the fabled kiosk, and judging by the thin layer of snow dusting his shoulders, he had been sitting there for quite some time. Bam watched as he reached for a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag, and the skater knitted his brows, acutely aware that Ville’s sobriety coins were now worthless. He was even more aware of the fact that this was his fault, and not because of the sex, no, that was irrelevant, but because he had been selfish enough to tear open old wounds, wounds that had, according to Line, barely had the time to close in the first place.

“Fuck,” he said to himself, suddenly wishing he would have just stayed put in West Chester. For about five minutes, he stood there and considered his options. How would he react to being found when he clearly wanted to be lost? To being confronted with the contents of the bottle he now cradled in the crook of his arm? He sighed and began to move, the snow wet and mushy under his feet. When he lifted his gaze, he was met by Ville’s emerald gaze. His limbs froze for a second, and he half anticipated that the Finn would try to flee, but he just sat there, staring blankly ahead, his face devoid of emotion. He started walking again, and his legs felt impossibly heavy as he approached him.

“… Hey,” he said, offering him a small smile.

“Bam.” Ville’s eyes landed on the bottle – on his sin – and he clicked his tongue and said, “Unfortunate, this.”

The American shrugged. “Well, been there, done that.”

Ville kept staring at the bottle, and instead of responding to Bam’s comment, he reached for his brand new lighter and lit a fag. The younger man stole a glance at the pack saw that he had already gone through half of it. He had so much nicotine and alcohol running through his system, his limbs were shaking. Or maybe the fucker was just cold? The snow here was nothing compared to the innumerable avalanches that fell from the heavens back in Scandinavia, but he had not brought his jacket and was probably soaked to the skin.

“… Isn’t that…” Bam frowned as he noticed something on the ground, partially hidden beneath the snow, and as he leaned down and poked at it, he saw that it was indeed the photo, the one from the airline magazine nearly twenty years ago. It had been torn to shreds and was, of course, as wet as Ville. It was unsalvageable.

“Couldn’t look at the bloody thing,” Ville said weakly, his face nearly whiter than the snow. “I just couldn’t… can’t cope with it… couldn’t, Bam.” Tears filled his eyes, and he looked absolutely downtrodden, but in spite of his obvious sorrow, he treated the younger man with a look of disgust.
Bam raised a brow. “Why’s that?”

“It’s how you see me, isn’t it?” he muttered angrily, his voice taking on a hard edge. “Pretty boy Valo. A perfect little plaything for when you’re bored, but nothing more. No-o, just a toy for whenever you get tired of your little harem at home.” He laughed darkly, adding, “Or rather, whenever you get tired of pretending to be straight – even if no one is really buying it.”

Bam heaved a sigh and grabbed the bottle, shaking it. Only about half a deciliter was left.

“In case you didn’t know,” the skater said, drawing in a sharp breath, “you’re being a total cunt.”

“Oh, it’s always that word with you! I’m always a ‘cunt’ – or a ‘bitch’, not an asshole or idiot like the next man.” He drew in a frustrated breath, his eyes shining with tears of fury. “Why must you feminize me so?”

Bam smiled a little, humored by the Finn’s alcohol fueled outburst.

“Don’t you laugh at me, Bam-”

“Alright, kusipää. Point taken.”

The Finn growled something rather unintelligible under his breath – most likely a Finnish insult to compliment the smooth kusipäähe had just delivered. Good thing Bam could not for the life of him remember any of the Finnish words Ville had taught him back in the day. Ville, still watching him with a less than pleased expression on his face, took a long puff of his cigarette and blew out a steady stream of bluish smoke that quickly dissolved. Bam grabbed the bottle, placed it on the soggy ground and plopped down next to Ville. For some time, they just sat there, and Bam texted Linde and told him he had found the missing singer – and that if he did not catch a cold, he would most likely develop lung cancer within the next twenty-four hours. And because he was a fucking saint, he purposely failed to mention the alcohol.

“There’s one tradition I’d really like to discontinue,” Bam eventually said. “We never really talked about stuff when we were, well, when we were together – and with my ex-wives, I never really talked about stuff either, even if they kept bugging me about it. And I hope that, if you’re still interested in this – us, that we can talk shit through.” He cleared his throat. “That we can be honest.”

The Finn’s eyes widened, and then, once he understood what Bam was actually hinting at, his eyes filled with fresh tears and he shook his head, whispering, “No, Bam.”

The younger man rolled his eyes and elbowed him in the side. “What do you mean ‘no’?”

“I-I…” Ville drew his lower lip between his teeth and eyed the bottle, still feeling the burn of the liquid in his throat, and he felt like screaming, felt like punching the living shit out of someone, because how the mighty have fallen! He had been completely sober for about ten years, and now, in a shady park in London, he had broken his oath over what was essentially nothing. How could that be?

“Don’t be an idiot,” Bam said, pulling him in for a sideways hug.

 “…I had alcohol, Bam,” he whispered bleakly as if the world was about to end, and an ugly sob tore from his chest. “I-I had… I had alcohol – I-I…”

“Hey, it’s fine, Willa. One day at a time, right?”

“I’m pathetic,” he whispered, and his voice was laced with frustration verging on despair. “I-I
haven’t touched alcohol since…” He squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting Bam to see the tears, but
they streamed down his face nonetheless, leaving his eyelids thick and swollen and his skin blotched.
There were so many things he could have said to finalize that sentence, but the words clung to his
tongue, refusing to be voiced.

The American pressed a kiss to the older man’s temple, feeling guilty about what had happened,
about the thoughts and feelings he had stirred, and he consoled him, running his hand down his back.
The wool was heavy with melted snow, and he knew they ought to get back to the hotel. Ville was
in dire need of a warm shower.

“I’m pathetic,” the Finn repeated, his voice cracking.

“You’re not pathetic, Willa. You’re just throwing yourself one hell of a pity party right now.”

“… Y-you don’t want…” He stopped and drew in a sharp breath. “You cannot possibly want to get
involved with me again, Bam. T-this is why you… you left me.”

“I was too young back then, Willa. You know what’s happened between then and now.”

Ville said nothing as he tried to pull himself together, but that was easier said than done.

“Go home, Bam,” he said, and then he started sobbing again. “I-I’m not… n-not good for you.”

Bam stared at Ville for a long time. Then, before the Finn could tell him to go home for a second
time, he reached for the bottle, uncapped it and drank what little was left, the familiar burn of the
vodka enough to make his head spin. Oh, how he had wanted to surrender to the bottle, time and
time again, but funnily enough, that was not what he had just done.

“Are you insane?” Ville yelled and tore the now empty bottle from his hands. “Oh, Gods – I-I can’t
believe-”

Bam just smiled sweetly and said, “Let’s do this together, Willa.”

“What?”

The skater found his wallet and held out his sobriety coins, letting Ville’s eyes glide over them.

“These,” he said in a silent voice, “have to go.” And just as the singer opened his mouth to tell him
what a bloody fool he was, he leapt to his feet and tossed the coins – all nine of them – in a trash bin
by the kiosk. The woman who sat there selling hotdogs and cigarettes gave him a long look, and he
grinned at her and said, “What a fine day to be alive, miss,” before returning to the park bench – and
the shocked Finn who sat on it.

“… Nine?” he whispered, no longer pale. No, he looked more ashen than anything else, as if he had
difficulties breathing and was slowly suffocating.

“Doesn’t matter anymore, Willa. But yeah.”

“… Y-you were just a few months away,” he choked out.

“Willa,” Bam said, and he cupped the older man’s cheek in his hands and made him meet his gaze.
“It’s been ten years since I broke up with you. And come on, how stupid are you? I don’t give a fuck
about that one miserable year I spent trying to scrape myself off the gutters of hell. Now I just want
to move forward, and I want to, I don’t know, build something with you! So don’t get all weird
about some stupid coins – they don’t mean shit. You know what does mean something though? You.
I fucking worship you, Walo. I love you with all my heart, and suppressing that love, well, it’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever done, and that’s gotta mean something coming from me!”

The moment he stopped talking, Ville closed the gap between them and kissed him. It was a slow and strangely sensible kiss for someone who had just downed a bottle of vodka, but then again, it was not driven by the madness of nostalgia or the desire to have him, as had been the case last night. When it ended, his head lolled against the skater’s chest. He closed his eyes and said, “I love you too, Bam-Bam,” and it came so naturally, even after all these years of separation, it almost took him by surprise. A wide smile spread across the younger man’s face, and he hugged him from an awkward angle and laughed, hopelessly happy and completely oblivious of passers-by.

After about ten minutes, another cigarette and a couple of hotdogs, they returned to the hotel. Left behind in the park were nine colorful sobriety coins, an empty bottle of vodka and a torn-up photo.

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